Toradora! Volume8

source : https://www.baka-tsuki.org/project/index.php?title=Toradora!:Volume8

These are the novel illustrations that were included in volume 8

とらドラ8!

始業式前日。インフルエンザからようやく回復したものの、精神的にはいまだ立ち直れない竜児に、大河は自立宣言を突きつける。それは……、他ならない竜児と、実乃梨のため。

そして幕を開ける新学期。竜児はぎくしゃくしながらも実乃梨となんとかもう一度向き合おうとする。折りしも学年最後のイベント、修学旅行が目前に迫っており、竜児はそこで実乃梨の真意を確かめようと決意するが——。

なにやら雰囲気の変わった大河と北村、新学期になって突き放すような態度をとる亜美。それぞれの思惑を秘めた修学旅行の行方は!?　超弩級ラブコメ第８弾！

た-20-11
電撃文庫
550

とらドラ8!
竹宮ゆゆこ

9784048671705

ISBN978-4-04-867170-5
C0193 ¥550E

1920193005509

ASCII MEDIA WORKS

発行● アスキー・メディアワークス

定価: 本体 550 円

※消費税が別に加算されます

竹宮ゆゆこ（たけみや）

2月24日生まれ、東京都在住。最近よく見かけるこの名も知らぬ花……。超でかい……。しかも花のつく数が異常……。超多い……。なんか……大味……。これがそこらに生えているわが町……アスファルトの隙間……街路樹の根元……そこらに……繁茂……。

【電撃文庫作品】

わたしたちの田村くん
わたしたちの田村くん2
とらドラ！
とらドラ2！
とらドラ3！
とらドラ4！
とらドラ5！
とらドラ6！
とらドラ7！
とらドラ8！
とらドラ・スピンオフ！ 幸福の桜色トルネード

イラスト：ヤス

1984年8月3日生。O型。徳島県生まれ東京都在住。近所の蕎麦屋さんがパーフェクトで素敵です。接客・味・値段……文句なしに最悪！　こんなお店初めてだよ！

カバー／暁印刷

とらドラ8!

竹宮ゆゆこ

イラスト◎ヤス

みなさーん、もうすぐ修学旅行ですよー！

楽しみですね！

行ってみたいところとか、あります？

Q

地獄の沖縄へようこそ

高須竜児

「……地獄……。それか魔界……。
……まあ、俺たちが行くのは沖縄なんだけどな。
沖縄か……はあ……」

なんだかテンション低いですね。冬休みになにかありました？

「……インフルエンザで入院を少々……」

逢坂大河

「私たちの修学旅行は沖縄よ……それでいいんじゃないの……？
……楽しみだわ……ええ……とってもね……」

あらら、こちらも元気ないみたい。二人ともどうしちゃったんでしょうねえ。

「……さあ……どうしたんだろうね……はは……」

北村祐作

「なんだなんだ湿っぽい顔をして！
修学旅行は授業の一環だ！
行き先は沖縄だ！　ホテルは那覇だ！
そして俺は初飛行機だ！
否が応でも高まる期待はもはやレッドゾーン！
南の海に轟け、我がリーダーシップよ！」

よっ、さすが北村くん！　生徒会長にしてクラス委員長！
……でも、沖縄以外に、行きたいところはありませんか？

「なぜそんなことを訊くんです？
沖縄こそベストチョイス、迷いはありません！
吹け、琉球の風！」

櫛枝実乃梨

海へ

「第一メディテーション、パイン！
……しゃぐしゃぐしゃぐ～っ！　うめえ、パインうめえ～！　超あま～いっ、ジュ～シ～ッ！
第二メディテーション、沖縄そば！
……ずぞぞぞぞ～っ！　うめえ、そばうめえ～！　超山盛りっ、ラフティ～ッ！
第三メディテーション、ブルーシールアイス！
……ぺろぺろぺろ～っ！　うめえ、アイスう」

グルメ妄想はそのへんでストップ！　怖いから！

……ていうか、そ、そんなに、沖縄が楽しみですか？
真冬だし、ベストシーズンじゃないですよ……？

「ふっ、笑止――この鋼鉄の筋肉で鎧われし
我が肉体の前には、真冬も真夏も関係ないわ！」

川嶋亜美

「NYかパリで買い物しまくり旅行とかよくなーい？
それかヨーロッパ一周も悪くないかもぉ。
ウィーンとかスイスとかぁ、イタリアも行ってみたいしぃ。
あ、でもでもぉ、向こうの事務所にスカウトされちゃったらどうしよ～！
や～ん、亜美ちゃん日本語しかしゃべれなーい♥」

……いや……その……うちは普通の公立高校なんで。

「わかってるっての。訊くから言ってみただけよ。
ま、沖縄でも上出来じゃん？
さすがに海は入れないかもだけどぉ、
プールぐらいはあるんでしょ～？」

春田浩次

「沖縄だよ行き先は沖縄！
青空の下で亜美ちゃんがビキニだよ～！」
「ひょ～！　南国の眩しい太陽の下で俺もビキニだよ～！」

……あの……も、もしも、沖縄じゃない、としたら……どうします？

「なんで？　沖縄しかありえないっしょ！
入学したときから修学旅行は二年の冬、
行き先は沖縄！　って決まってたじゃん」
「いまさら他のところなんて
考えられないですねフヒヒ！」

能登久光

「ど、どうしよう……
めっちゃ沖縄楽しみにしてる
……やっべー……」

どうした独身(30)、なにをドキドキしている!?
はたして修学旅行の行き先はいずこ?

デザイン◎荻窪裕司

ゆゆこ先生にめっちゃお世話になってます！　お疲れ様です！
イエーイ！　たらこイエーイ！
「とらドラ！」のコミカライズを担当してます絶叫です！
「とらドラ！」は皆可愛くてうはうはします。
これ文庫？　本当に文庫に載るんですか？
はは…騙してるんですか……？
そういえばココだけの話、
先日ゆゆこ先生とご一緒させていただいた時に
「たらこの筋の話」をして「ぁ…この人本物だ…」と思いました。
「とらドラ！」すごく楽しいです！　応援してます！

TEXT&ILLUSTRATION　絶叫

Chapter 1

Twenty-three o'clock, twelve minutes.

Today would be over in forty-eight minutes.

Breathing out a stream of white mist, Takasu Ryuuji looked up at the night sky from his open window. Tonight, nothing could be seen as both the moon and stars were hidden on the other side of the clouds. Ryuuji felt even more depressed, even thinking about how nice it would be if this kind of night could go on forever.

It was a particularly cold night. The sub-zero wind felt as though it was piercing right into his skin, the bone-freezing chill rising straight up from his stomach. The body that was only wearing a pair of shorts under the hoodie was shivering as his teeth clattered incessantly. His dry lips were completely frozen, giving them an extremely hard exterior. His fingers and toes were already numb, and his heart---his heart had been frozen since long ago.

Ever since that night on Christmas Eve.

Ryuuji's heart had been pacing around aimlessly in the zero-degree darkness ever since that night.

"......How nice it would be.....if morning never came.....
."

In the darkened room, Ryuuji bent down, sighing as he sat down, leaning his back on the windowsill. He brushed away some strands of hair, his arms around one knee. To protect his ears that were frozen and hurting from the wind, he put on the hood of his hoodie, closing his eyes slightly, subconsciously holding his breath while biting down on his chattering teeth.

It had been a week since the start of the new year.

The new school term would start tomorrow.

The start of a new school term also meant that he would have to come face to face with 'her'. Whenever he thought of that prospect, Ryuuji's heart would start beating erratically as though it was broken. He also felt as though no matter how much oxygen he breathed in, it wouldn't be enough. Everyday, every night, every moment, without warning, 'her' figure and voice would suddenly awaken in his mind. The memories of spring, summer and autumn, and then the happenings of that night, would be cruelly replayed over and over again in high definition.

"......What kind of expression should I face her with..... "

The pair of blank eyes turned up towards the sky. Just how should he face the 'her' in reality when he wouldn't even bring himself to face his memories. As Ryuuji held his head in his hands and bit down hard on his dry and cracked lips, the taste of blood on his tongue. He was deep in thought, with his eyes fully open but focusing on nothing in particular, the ridiculously huge bags under his eyes were made even more prominent. Ryuuji's face that made him looked like a cornered criminal was solely caused by his inability to fall asleep during the past few days. He could imagine the police coming to his apartment uninvited and without taking off their shoes. He would then be arrested amid a host of shouting from the police as a result of his neighbours' contact with the police. 'The kitchen's very suspicious!' 'Ah! I found it! It's white powder!'.....No, that's only sugar.

"......hahaha.....haha.....ha....."

It's stupid isn't it.

Ryuuji let out a humourless laugh, but continued to think. Even if it was a misunderstanding, he probably

would not need to go to school tomorrow if he was arrested --- he was half-serious about it.

Just as his finger was gathering all the dust on the windowsill of its own accord,

".....ah"

The light suddenly came on in a window in the opposite condominium. A small figure darted across the room that had suddenly become as bright as day.

Needless to say, the figure was the owner of the apartment that Ryuuji hadn't seen much recently, Aisaka Taiga.

Taiga's petite body was clothed in blue pajamas and a white sweater as she walked around in the spacious bedroom that was as big as the Takasu residence.

She then seemed to notice Ryuuji's eyes on her as she turned towards him in response, their eyes meeting for an instance.

"Yo.....Taiga."

Ryuuji stood up, lifting up a single hand in greeting. And in the next moment.

".....Ah!.....What's this.....!"

Argh.

I'm so unlucky.

I just had to be spotted by this fellow.

Taiga then thought to herself: Alright I'll just ignore him and pretend I never saw anything, something that was clearly written on her face. Even though she had obviously noticed Ryuuji, Taiga acted as though he was part of the atmosphere as she hid herself in Ryuuji's blind-spot and brusquely drew the curtains together.

What did I do? Being the nice person that he was, Ryuuji couldn't help but to check the morality of his actions for the past few months, ultimately unable to come up with any explanations for Taiga's behaviour.

"What is she trying to do.....suddenly ignoring me like that....."

He said.

"Taiga! You saw me right, why are you ignoring me!?"

Pulling back his hood, Ryuuji shouted loudly.

To Ryuuji, who always thought of himself as a sensible guy, this was a rare occurrence. He completely ignored the fact that he would wake up his neighbours, mainly because of Taiga's actions. She knew about the whole thing, but chose to ignore Ryuuji, who was in the middle of a mental crisis.

And it wasn't just about that. Ryuuji also couldn't understand Taiga's recent attitude towards him.

"Hey! Open the window! I have something to tell you!"

But there was no answer even though she must have heard him.

"Taiga!.....Damn it, you're seriously ignoring me aren't you.....If you really want to do this! Then prepare for the consequences!"

A cursed aura emanated from every part of Ryuuji's body as he glared at the opposite window. The constant

build-up of negative feelings had awakened Ryuuji's dark side, as his dark expression seemed to have demonic properties. Destroy this planet together with the milky way! Ryuuji walked towards the doorway with that kind of expression, bringing back a broom. He stuck his body out of the window with the broom in hand.

"Taiga! Taiga! Come out! I know you can hear me! Taiga!"

Bang bang bang bang bang bang! The wooden broom handle knocked repeatedly against Taiga's bedroom window as though it wanted to break the glass. This was in fact, a banned move as it had once resulted in the window being broken and the broom thrust into Taiga's face. But Ryuuji had decided to use his ultimate move tonight.

A noise that was louder than any alarm clock sounded out in the night.

"......What are you trying to do!"

Even Taiga was unable to ignore that. The curtains parted with a vengeance for the long-awaited reunion. '... ...Ah!' Ryuuji couldn't help but step back at Taiga's horrific expression. Her beautiful features that rivaled

those of french dolls was now twisted demonically. Along with the open window, Taiga's rage was also on full throttle as she grabbed the broom, pulling it to her with astonishing speed and strength.

"You better not think too highly of yourself."

"Oh,ah!?"

Ryuuji's balance was easily broken as his body was dragged in the direction of the pulling force, then falling off--

"Ahhhh!"

Stars shined brightly in front of his eyes. 'Five points!' By the time he realized that the voice was his, Ryuuji was already lying down on the floor of his room. Though he was lucky not to have fallen into the gap between the two windows, the impact of his fall was still enough to stun him for a few minutes.

"Tsk! Pig!"

Bang! The window was closed. Whoosh! The sound of drawing curtains. Those were the only things that was going through Ryuuji's head at that moment.

And then, he was the only one left in the silence of the night.

Too much, this was, too much.

".....heh,heh,heh....."

Tears flowed out from the eyes that had been hit by the broom, mucus flowing down towards his mouth.

"Heh.....heh heh....."

Lying on the floor, covering his face, Ryuuji was unable to discern whether he was laughing or crying. On the other hand, tsk, pig. Taiga's voice, sounding like she was about to vomit, came across sharply. Pig, I'm a pig. Ryuuji brought out his inner pig as he slowly stood up, moved over to squat beside the window, biting down on the curtains.

"Heh heh heh.....!"

He stared at the opposite window. No wonder she was the Palmtop Tiger, cruel and beautiful, tearing his already mauled heart in to shreds in an instant.

"You're extremely irritating!? Don't you get bored of--"

"Heh heh heh!"

"Ahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!"

Taiga, who had opened her window again, screamed at the sight of the smiling and crying Ryuuji and fell backwards. Ryuuji was shocked at seeing her fall as he couldn't help but stick his hand out towards her.

".....Ah, you're really a product that's full of defects! I can barely believe that God's pranks can lead to such cruel results.....it's so scary! It's impossible for mere human intellect to map out Ryuuji's face!"

Hearing Taiga's words, Ryuuji's hands grasped weakly at thin air.

"That.....that's the first time in my life I've heard such hurtful words...! No, what's worse is that you actually swept my face with a broom! Do you even know the history behind this broom!? It's a broom that has been retired from the sweeping of the bathroom to be in charge of sweeping the doorway and the corridor!"

"Alright alright, that's it for tonight, go back to sleep, you pig! Tsk, so noisy.....looks like the gene that accounts for dog-like barking has surfaced....."

"What did you say!? This disturbance started because you ignored me! Argh.....How, how dare you treat me like air!? You know how sad I am now don't you!? But you still, still-"

"What am I supposed to know."

"Huh!?"

Taiga gave a surprising answer as she continued to stick her chin out arrogantly, looking down on Ryuuji's face. She made a noise with her nose, her big eyes looking as though she was seeing a pile of cat dung on the side of the road.

"I'm too busy to play around with you."

"What, What are you talking about!? How could you be busy when it's obvious that you're always so free and bored!"

"Whatever makes you happy, I'm not obliged to explain everything to you. Your pea-sized brain is unable to process the logic behind my actions!"

In the next moment,

--Ding~Ding~Ding~

"Ah, it's time."

An alarm sounded from Taiga's cellphone. Upon hearing this jarring sound, Ryuuji's tension eased away, even though he didn't know what the alarm was for.

"That's about it, bye. It's going to be a new school term tomorrow, so shouldn't you be in bed sleeping? You should have a load of other things to do besides whining to me right."

Such indifference. Ryuuji couldn't help but stare at Taiga as she hurriedly closed the window and prepared to walk away.

"......I see....."

"What"

In response to Ryuuji's voice, Taiga wrinkled her cute features in irritation. Since we're both humans, why should I give you any special treatment? Which was why she merely threw out a single word.

Ryuuji was hurt once again.

So the result was just something like this?

".....So to you, this is just something that you don't even want to hear about....."

Even though Taiga had cried upon hearing about what had happened on Christmas Eve--Ryuuji bit his lip as he stared blankly at Taiga. Were the tears from that day fake ? Ryuuji wanted to ask her about that.

"You're lying aren't you--"

"Minorin rejecting you--You have to be lying"

.....It was three days after the Christmas Eve party, in the hospital where Ryuuji was sent to after coming down with flu. After he was able to speak normally, Ryuuji told Taiga everything that had happened on that night. Everything that had happened after Taiga had sent him away.

After hearing about the entire incident, Taiga started to cry under the face-mask that all visitors were required to wear.

"Why did it become like this? That's not true isn't it--"

With her pair of tiny hands covering her eyes, Taiga cried, sitting on the chair beside the hospital bed. Ryuuji's fierce eyes also started to moisten. The two of them didn't speak, creating a teary atmosphere.

However, Ryuuji felt a little better after seeing Taiga's tears. Though he was still depressed, he was thankful that there was someone who was willing to cry along with him. Here was someone who understood his pain, and was willing to face his problems together with him.

But.

"Just because you've been rejected by Minorin doesn't mean you have to throw a tantrum right?"

Wrinkling her eyebrows, Taiga dug into her nose after digging through her ear.

"And haven't I already said that I have something important to do. Ah~.....I could be late from listening to your useless rants."

As she was speaking, Taiga grabbed the 'thing' that was on the window-side table and brought it to the window, tearing off its cover boldy. Ryuuji was left speechless,

"That---That's. Your. Something important.....!"

Trembling with rage, Ryuuji thought, so that's the reason why Taiga has been ignoring me?

"Tsk, you're really irritating, so I don't have a choice but to eat here. Hmph, I'm eating."

Slurp!--- a plastic cup of noodles.

"You.....You're, really....."

"Ah~That's delicious.....What were you saying again?"

Ryuuji's heart was shattered by the sight of Taiga slurping her cup noodles while talking in a blissful tone.

"......Never mind, it's nothing."

"Is that so."

Slurp~

"......Keep eating like this and you'll go to school with a stuffed face tomorrow!"

Ryuuji cursed Taiga to become fat, to which she merely replied with a arrogant sniff of her nose.

"That's alright. I'm already mentally prepared for that fate. And didn't you already know about this?"

She stuck out her flat chest, while hugging her cup noodles.....but didn't notice that the soup was spilling onto her white sweater.

Ah---What kind of situation is this? The rented apartment complex and its neighbouring condominium. Ryuuji's room was a mere 2 metres away from Taiga's room. On the same floor with the same view, one with a window facing north, one with a window facing south.

Ryuuji leaned over his window, staring at Taiga's happily slurping face. Those stuffed cheeks, really.....

makes me angrier.....no, Ryuuji didn't think that, as he just felt a little bit weak.

".....That's your dinner?"

Ryuuji asked softly.

"Nope. I ate a meat bun and corn bread at nine. This is supper."

".....that's the worse menu ever. You bought all of this from the convenience store didn't you?"

Taiga put on a 'I don't know you expression' and turned away with the chopsticks in her mouth in reply. She didn't give a definite answer, which proved that Ryuuji was right.

".....Just what are you trying to do.....You don't come to my house.....and just eat junk food.....and you don't even eat your vegetables....."

"What are you doing? You're hungry and feel like eating cup noodles too aren't you?"

"No! .....I'm really getting angry here! I'm angry!"

Ryuuji ran his hand through his hair in frustration as he let loose a shout in the night sky. His originally dangerous-looking gangster face was now twisting in unimaginable ways.

"I've been wanting to ask you! Why don't you come to my house anymore!? And why did you ignore me just now!? Just what is happening!?"

Ryuuji could feel the dark energy emanating out from his body. Ugh.....at the opposite window, Taiga gave a look reserved for disgusting things. She didn't speak aloud, but her rose-red lips were obviously muttering something. He knew all of that, but could do nothing about his anger.

"Just what is happening with you! Didn't I just tell you not to throw tantrums?"

"I'm not throwing a tantrum! I. Am. Angry with you!"

In the presence of the most dangerous creature on the planet, the Palmtop Tiger, Ryuuji shouted loudly, utilizing the full potential of his facial features.

"You, you actually said that I was irritating!? You actually said that! Are you that bothered by speaking to

me!? Is the hurt 'me' so irritating!? Weren't you very sympathetic towards me at the beginning! What is this! Though I'm not asking for your sympathy or comfort, but why can't you talk to me like you usually do?"

"......Huh?"

"Argh!"

---He knew.

Taiga was obviously trying to keep her distance from him. But he wanted to know the reason. He wanted to shout, why?

When he was in hospital, Taiga was surprisingly enthusiastic in taking care of Ryuuji. But after Ryuuji was discharged from the hospital, Taiga stopped coming over to the Takasu residence. She gave all kinds of excuses to avoid coming over for breakfast and dinner. Even during her usually-free lunchtime period, she would be out of her condominium. During the few times that Ryuuji had seen her, Taiga would always be eating cup noodles and the like. Even though there were a lot of delicious foods over at the Takasu residence. Even though he had told her to make herself at home. Even though he had made Taiga's share of the food everyday though she didn't

want it. Even Yasuko was saying, 'What has happened to Taiga-chan lately~She hasn't come for a while~', and was not as energetic as before.

Even though Taiga's place at the table was still decorated with her special cushion.

"The 'me' who just got rejected by Kushieda, and is depressed, is annoying to you isn't it! Ah that's right, you're annoyed aren't you! Well, sorry for being so annoying!"

Ryuuji shouted at the top of his voice with an expression befitting of a demon who just crawled out from the depths of hell. He understood that what he was doing was ugly and uncalled for. But the feelings that were pushed to the bottom of his heart would not stop coming out once there was an outlet for release. He continued shouting, waving his hands like a maniac,

"Enough! I've had enough! Since you've already abandoned me! That's right! Why don't you just say it out loud! Why don't you just throw away our friendship like how you throw away a piece of rubbish! I obstruct and annoy you! I understand, I get it, so why don't you just say it out loud, I want to hear you say.....ah!"

"Shut up, you stupid insect."

Just before Ryuuji completed his rant, a single chopstick flew through the air like a flying dagger, hitting Ryuuji between the eyes. Though there was no penetration the impact of the hit wasn't light, leaving Ryuuji in a daze.

"You stupid insect. You insect. Calling you a dog was a compliment, so don't think too highly of yourself."

Taiga tried to break the remaining chopstick in her hand into two even halves, but failed and ended up with two bits with their length in a 70-30 ratio. Thereafter, she violently devoured the remaining food in the cup. After swallowing the last of her supper, the large eyes which she used to stare at Ryuuji revealed a faint trace of pity behind the ridicule in them.

"So you won't understand unless I tell you everything?
"

"......What?"

"I'm doing all this for you. The heavens are in disarray, and so the Taiga who's more noble than God and more compassionate than the Buddha has stepped onto stage.

And you're still asking me why? Ryuuji's really a pighead, an extremely stupid pighead! I've known this for a long time."

"......You think I'm that bad?"

"But even I didn't think you would be so stupid, you're like a king among the pigheads."

"......you deliberately avoid me, you don't come over for meals, and you ignore me when you see me.....that's all for my sake?"

"Yes.....To be more precise, it's for you and Minorin's sake."

Taiga sighed, and looked at Ryuuji in the eyes. And then, 'listen up', she began talking,

"I've been thinking ever since you were hospitalized and I saw your constipated sleeping face."

Taiga's snow-white cheeks turned downwards. She placed a hand over her heart, and then shook her head violently.

"Ah, your face was really terrifying, I've never seen anything like that.....Hahahaha!"

Taiga started laughing uncontrollably.

Bang! Ryuuji subconsciously slammed the window shut. That was just a joke! Open up! Taiga's voice carried over the glass barrier that was the window. No choice but to open up.

".....Right now, I'm at my limit! I'll die if you pull another one on me.....!"

"Alright, I get it. I've seriously.....yes, seriously thought about this. And then I realized from the bottom of my heart that, it was so stupid."

".....Me?"

"No. Me."

As if she was laughing at her own foolishness, Taiga gave a lopsided grin and shrugged. She closed her eyes as if she was announcing that the joke stops here, I'll be serious from now on.

"What have I been doing all this time? I'm the biggest idiot."

The reopened eyes reflected the darkness of the night. As she ran her hand through her long and silky hair, Taiga leaned onto the windowsill, looking up at the starless night sky.

And then she breathed out a cloud of white mist, her voice resounding in the quietness of the night.

"I said I was supporting you and Minorin, but I was eating at your house everyday at the same time. Minorin couldn't have not gotten the wrong impression from that. Even if I had told her that she's getting the wrong idea, it wouldn't have achieved anything. This is common sense. I always.....always do things without thinking of the consequences, always eating off you. I'm such an idiot."

As she smoothed the fringe that was being messed up by the wind, Taiga smiled. As their eyes met, Ryuuji felt a little confused.

"So you're saying that, you think"

Ryuuji turned away, preparing to continue his sentence. The cold wind on his skin felt like little knives.

"......that the reason Kushieda rejected me was because she misunderstood our relationship?"

Out of the corner of his eyes, he saw Taiga nod in acknowledgment, and Ryuuji looked down at his feet, nodding in response.

"......Because Kushieda misunderstood, you're going to stop coming over to my house?"

Another nod. And then a statement,

"I'm never going to your house ever again."

Silence fell between the two of them. The sub-zero night felt as though it was literally frozen, frozen in an endless darkness. But even though he was silent, Ryuuji did not agree with all of Taiga's words. Or should he say, he totally disagreed with her. Ryuuji licked his parched lips,

"You say you're not coming over to my house anymore ."

He looked into her eyes again, as though he was going to see into the depths of her heart, and held his gaze.

"And then you'd get Minorin and I together, are you serious about that? Don't you think that the sole reason for Minorin rejecting me was because she didn't like me?"

"I don't think so."

Taiga's answer was confident.

"I think that Minorin likes you. It's obvious. There's no other reason to explain your rejection other than the fact that Minorin was concerned about me.....Why do you think Minorin rejected you? Did you really think that she 'didn't like you'?"

"Umm....."

The question was right on. Ryuuji held his breath and scratched his head as he pressed his face onto the window ledge. He didn't know whether to speak or not, while forcing his voice out at the same time,

".....About that, I really, don't understand. I don't understand. But I don't think that.....Kushieda doesn't like me at all.....which is why I can't accept the fact that she rejected me without even listening to my confession."

He closed his eyes, drawing out 'her' features in his mind.....the features of Kushieda Minori.

"I'm saying that, actually I think Kushieda might..... like me.....just a little bit.....but I'm probably reading too much into it....."

"Ta-Ka-Su-Ku-N! Hi YO Man!"

The Minori in Ryuuji's memories laughed cheerfully. Her light footsteps sounding like dance steps in the wind . A pair of deep, honest eyes looked straight at Ryuuji. Though it sometimes wavered, sometimes saw right through him, sometimes revealed a trace of stubbornness

, but the direction of her gaze never did move away from Ryuuji.

".....But I've been rejected so easily, or rather.....she didn't even let me tell her about my feelings. I've been rejected outright. But every time I think about this, I find that I'm unable to accept this kind of ending. My mind is in a mess right now.....I'm unable to let go."

Ryuuji knew that the temperature of her fingertips was fiery hot. He would never forget the fire on her fingertips , nor her voice that he had heard at that time. And the soft wavering that was hidden within her slightly quavering voice.

Through their daily conversations, hadn't Minori revealed the secrets in her heart to him, bit by bit?

Ryuuji was unable to let go of her gaze, her voice, her expressions, her everything. Everything about her seemed to signal a hidden meaning beneath the surface. Which was why Ryuuji had thought that perhaps she had liked him? Had he gotten a 'possibility of future development'?

"I.....I don't understand.....I really, don't understand any of that. Was it my imagination? Everything that had

happened between us, was I merely reading too much into our interactions? Something like this.....I don't believe it. I don't believe that it is something like this.

".....Me too."

Taiga said softly.

I don't think you've misunderstood Minorin either. So -- She continued to say.

Ryuuji lifted his gaze to Taiga's face in the opposing window. Taiga also looked at him. In this starless night, only Taiga's eyes shone with light. There was no wavering, no uncertainty, her gaze staring straight ahead , and then,

"Stop running away."

Taiga's voice echoed loudly in his ears.

"Even if you've been rejected, you still like Minorin don't you? You still believe that Minorin probably likes you, don't you? Then don't run away! What you have to do now is continue liking Minorin, so that she'll give you

a totally different answer when she sees that I'm not coming over to eat at your house anymore. That's why you shouldn't give up on yourself!"

"......But"

"No buts......except, I'm a little afraid of facing Minorin too."

As if to hide the hoarseness in her voice, Taiga cleared her throat loudly.

"......Why?"

"You still don't understand?.....Who called you to the place where Minorin rejected you?"

Ah, Ryuuji thought about the part about that night which he didn't want to recall the most.

Yes, Minori was called to the venue by the angel Taiga, and there, she rejected Ryuuji.

"And then it became like this.....Minorin hasn't met me even once after that incident. She's been busy with club activities, and went back to her grandmother's place for the new year, and I haven't heard her talk about what

happened on Christmas eve.....I can't play dumb, since I'm the one who made her see you."

Taiga bit her lower lip slightly as she spoke. Her fingertips roughly rubbed her forehead, as she breathed out white mist like a small animal. Her tone of voice was mixed with an undeniable trace of regret.

".....If I hadn't been so excited because of Christmas and pushed Minorin to go, things would have been different.....Don't you think so?"

"No I don't."

He answered truthfully. The result was disastrous, but the person who wished to confess his feelings, the person who decided to confess his feelings, the person who ran through the dark streets to get back to school, was Ryuuji himself.

But Taiga,

"But I think so."

I'm sorry, she said. It wasn't like her.

She didn't know that having to see her do this, being apologized to, and having the "responsibility" of being dumped robbed from him, made Ryuuji's heart beat even faster. She didn't know that it only made his already shattered pride shatter even more. If she'd been here with him in the corner of this dark, cramped room, he could have smacked her head for this.

But where things were at now, he couldn't even do that.

".....But, I won't run away! And you!"

Taiga shouted and suddenly pointed at Ryuuji as if aiming straight for his heart.

"--You mustn't run away. Not from this. I know it's painful.....but if you run away, it will really all be over."

Ryuuji's heart stopped as if it had really been shot, really over.....the impact of those words took away his breath for a moment.

"Answer me, you insect."

".....Who're you calling an insect....."

"Are you ready to stop running away and face up?"

Ryuuji somehow managed to nod his head. There were many things that were eating at him concerning Taiga, but... whether he ran away or not, he probably still couldn't get over what happened yet.

Seeing Ryuuji nod in response, the edges of Taiga's mouth twitched as if she was preparing to make an important decision.

"From now on, I don't need you to wake me up in the morning. I won't eat your bentos, and I won't eat dinner with you. I'll solve these problems myself, and I'll also do the household chores myself. Minorin feels that Ryuuji's an indispensable existence to me. That's why I want to prove to her that I'm able to live perfectly well by myself. And then, you can just wait for Minori to give you another answer!"

After saying all these in one breath, Taiga slapped her cheeks with both of her hands. Awed by her aura, Ryuuji felt like he couldn't look directly at her.

He thought. Taiga is indeed a stronger person than he is.

He wanted to kick himself for throwing a tantrum because he thought Taiga had abandoned him. He wanted to knock himself down to the ground because he was feeling lonely right now. Pull yourself together, Ryuuji said to himself, nodding his head vigourously.

Even though he didn't think being separated from Taiga would help him with Minori, that was not the point. Ryuuji didn't want to look even more pathetic in front of Taiga when she made the decision to become more mature, more independent. He didn't want a growing Taiga to outrun him and leave him behind.

Ryuuji didn't want to be the weakling that couldn't recover from a small setback.

Ryuuji didn't want to end the one-sided feelings that he had held for so long.

".....I understand. Good luck! But.....please try not to start a fire."

Hearing that, Taiga confidently thrust out her chest,

"Yes, don't worry. I won't even touch the stove. I've decided to eat takeout food for the rest of my life!"

She said that kind of embarrassing thing with a totally straight face. Ryuuji had no choice but to sigh in disappointment.

"Just how long would you last on that kind of lifestyle.....

"What are you talking about! I'll last! Forever!"

Even though Taiga's face and nose were red from the biting wind, her lips curved up in a fearless grin.

"I'll be alright, so just go and do what you're supposed to do! Listen up, first you have to confirm Minorin's true feelings.....I'll find an opportunity for you to do that."

"Opportunity?"

"Yes, the perfect opportunity."

Nodding in response to Taiga's statement, Ryuuji prepared to close the window after saying goodnight to Taiga--four fingers were smashed by the window, and a bloodcurdling scream sounded in the silent night.

Stop running away.

And then confirm Minori's true feelings.

Though Ryuuji had made a decision, dawn was a long time away, and the world was still shrouded in darkness, with the light of hope nowhere to be found.

He didn't understand the meaning behind Taiga's ' opportunity'.

In the midst of the darkness, Ryuuji stared blankly at the ceiling. Unable to sleep as he hugged the heavy blanket.

Tomorrow would be the start of the new school term. The time of re-acquaintance.....If he started to think of how nice it would be if morning never arrived, Ryuuji would probably go into denial again--

* * *

"Good morning-------!"

Ryuuji's body twitched.

".....Inko-chan, you're really energetic today....."

As per normal, the Takasu residence was cold and dark in the early morning. Even though it was indoors, the exhalation of breath came out in streams of white mist. The hand that refilled Inko-chan's water and food was also numb with the cold.

On such a gloomy morning, Inko-chan was excitedly flapping his wings and shouting as though something good had happened.

"Good morning------! Good morning------!"

The parrot struggled to stretch its peeling feet, it's white eyeballs rolling back into it's head as it's mouth dropped open as though broken.

"Good morning! Good morning! Good morning! Good morning!"

"Hey wait a minute, Inko-chan! Shut up! Ah!"

The parrot flew out of its cage despite Ryuuji's best efforts to stop it. Inko-chan streaked past his knees and

started to run around on the tatami mat. As though it was mocking it's owner which had come to chase after it, the parrot made countless sudden turns, its sudden movement making it hard for human eyes to capture.

Ryuuji's eyebrows knotted together in frustration at the disturbance. Suddenly, he was struck by a flash of illumination. Such speed, and such gracefulness in the turning, the artful footwork seemed familiar---

".....Zidane.....! It's Zidane's Marseille Roulette.....!"

Ryuuji's mouth fell open in astonishment. Never in his wildest dreams had he thought that the fat parrot which he had had since his sixth year of primary school was one of the 'Galaticos'. What a surprise.

".....Just joking.....haha."

--Ryuuji decided to stop fooling around with himself. Even as he thought about how nice it would be if morning wouldn't come, it still came in the end.

Ryuuji was now trying to decide his next course of action.

On the other side of the room, Inko-chan, who seemed to be channeling the spirit of Zidane, was on its second round around its owner when it suddenly changed course and hopped into Yasuko's room!

After a few seconds, inhuman cries and the sound of a blanket being trampled on was heard.

"Ahhhhhhhh----You woke me up------

A pajama-clad figure climbed out of the darkened room, infecting the living room with the stench of alcohol . Ryuuji furrowed his eyebrows at the sight of her messy appearance.

"Caveman....."

"Gyaaa.....?"

His mother, Yasuko, whose hair was now in the shape of a chicken coop, had Takasu Zidane by the neck.

"Ah, you'll kill it!"

"It's all its fault!!! It stepped on Ya-chan's face---"

And then the Zidane that was in her hand,

".....bloop....."

Vomited.

Ah! Kya! Both mother and son let out anguished wails. In the gloomy morning, the crazy Zidane got its just deserts as it vomited out a green and sticky substance. But Yasuko had no intention of letting go of its neck as she swung Zidane from side to side, which,

".....Bloop.....bloop....."

Like a fountain, Inko-chan projectile-vomitted onto Yasuko's chin.

".....Ahhhhhhh!!! Ya-chan can't take it anymore!"

Stuffing the vomiting Zidane into its cage, Yasuko walked towards the toilet. Ripping the door open, Yasuko walked in.....and an abominable sound came out from the toilet soon after. Ryuuji couldn't even stuff his ears to keep out that unholy noise as his hands were full with Zidane--No, Inko-chan who was covered in vomit.

Sighing, Ryuuji tried to pretend that no sounds were coming out of the bathroom as he wiped Inko-chan clean with a wet towel. Ah, there's a spot that won't come off.....on closer inspection, its a natural feather pattern which just happened to look like the face of a corpse.

Putting Inko-chan back into its cage, Ryuuji eyes glowed blue as he muttered, I don't want to be a human anymore.....not.

"Are you alright after vomiting so much? Inko-chan, do you need to go to the vet?.....Well then, since its the opening ceremony at school today, I can skip school and take you there....."

His feelings of wanting to skip school was extremely obvious. Don't run away! -- Taiga's voice from the night before rang out in his head, but that's not running away. It's because Inko-chan's not feeling well. But that kind of excuse won't work.

"Good morning.....Good morning.....Good Morning.....!"

As if it planned to regain its lost calories, Inko-chan began to wolf down its feed. Its eyes bulging as it ate at

an inhuman speed, Inko-chan no longer cared about Ryuuji's existence. It was obvious that Inko-chan was a perfectly healthy avian sample. Ryuuji suddenly thought of a possibility,

Inko-chan, don't tell me that you--

".....were trying to cheer me up.....?"

"Ugu.....?"

--Never mind. Forget it.

Tearing his eyes from the blank face of the fat parrot, Ryuuji sighed and got up to wash the cup that Yasuko had used when she came back in the morning.

Looking at the clock, he realized that he had spent quite a bit of time resolving the vomiting Zidane incident .

"Ah--Ah.....I really don't want to go."

--No running away!--

Yes I got it. I'll go. And its not like I have the guts to skip the first day of school.

Taking down his uniform from it's perch, Ryuuji brushed it with a brush out of habit. He pulled a grey v-neck sweater over his school shirt, and then wore his school jacked over it without buttoning the buttons. Wrapping the wool muffler that Taiga liked very much around his neck, Ryuuji's preparations were complete. Though it was winter, Ryuuji didn't like to wear winter coats, since nothing would change that face. He had prepared his school bag the night before, so all that was left was to step out of the door.

".....I really, don't want to go....."

No, must go. Ryuuji shook his head furiously, trying to get rid of that cloud of depression.

"I'm leaving.....", Ryuuji said to Yasuko, who was rinsing her mouth in the bathroom.

"Be careful~....., bye bye Ryu-chan~"

Yasuko, who still seemed to be drunk even after vomiting, stood in front of her son, her mouth dripping with water,

"Did you remember to bring that along, it's on the table in my room~"

".....What's 'that'?"

"Hmm? Ah, Ryu-chan's been rather blur lately~ How could you have forgotten that~! It's the Okinawa thing~!"

Okinawa.....?

.....Okinawa!

Under the overpowering smell of alcohol, Ryuuji remembered. Gotta run back and take it.

"Oh no, I completely forgot about it."

The thing that was in Yasuko's room was the parental consent form required for the school trip to Okinawa. Though Ryuuji had been reminded to bring it on the first day of school, he had had too much to think about recently and thus forgot about it. It was embarrassing that even the perpetually drunk Yasuko could remember it.

"Okinawa Okinawa! That's so nice! Ya-chan wants to go too~!"

".....Right, I'll be leaving."

"Hmm.....you don't seem to be very energetic~?"

Stuffing the document into his bag while slipping into his shiny school shoes, Ryuuji opened the door. The north wind of the cold winter immediately blew into the house, forcing Ryuuji to close his eyes involuntarily.

Ryu-chan, are you alright~? Though he heard Ya-chan's voice, but Ryuuji didn't feel like replying. Even though it was so cold, the rays of the morning sun was still blindingly bright.

Now's not the time to think about Okinawa--

Walking along the road, Ryuuji looked at Taiga's condo out of the corner of his eyes. The shiny marble staircase paved the way to the glass doors which served at the entrance. The evergreen trees planted at the side were green as usual despite the cold winter.

But today, Ryuuji didn't intend to walk towards that tree-lined road, instead walking towards the road that led to school. Though he wasn't sure if the lazy Taiga would be able to get out of bed, Ryuuji chose to respect her decision.

Is she even awake at this time.....Though he didn't know what she was doing right now, but Ryuuji was happy to know of Taiga's determination. He felt lonely, and also a tad abandoned, but Ryuuji was happy that Taiga was trying to think of him in her decisions.

Breathing out white mist, Ryuuji thought about how he had always been assaulted by Taiga's schoolbag, scolded, strangled, poked in the eyes, was on the receiving end of her early-morning tantrums no matter if he was early or late, got thrown to the ground, had to listen to Taiga's ranting about Kitamura-kun, about Minorin, about baka-chi as he walked down this road together with Taiga.....and, and then, Taiga finally stood up by herself. And even said, 'this is for you and Minorin '.

Maybe Taiga has really grown up.

While on the other side, Ryuuji was still like this. Had such a huge gap opened up between them just because he got rejected and had fell sick. Right now, Ryuuji even felt that his legs might give way any moment. Though he had already made his decision to face up to reality, he was still being indecisive about it as he repeated 'what to

do what to do what to do what to do what to do' over and over in his head--

"......gah!"

He mimicked Taiga's actions the night before and slapped his cheeks with his hands.

Though he felt like running away, hadn't he already decided not to? He just had to take control and hide the embarrassment right? That's all he needs to do. And that'll be better than rolling over without a fight.

Ryuuji finally lifted his head just as a gust of wind assaulted his forehead. He looked to the front. What if I meet Kushieda on the way to school? But it was too late for such worries.

The only thing he could do now was to continue walking, for at least it'll stop the situation from worsening. Anyway, it wasn't like he had been rejected by his girlfriend. What Ryuuji should do now is to work towards his desired ending.

In retrospect, his feelings were one-sided from the start .

At the junction, the traffic light coincidentally changed to green just as he prepared to cross the road, slightly lifting Ryuuji's spirits at this small stroke of luck. Ryuuji had decided to greet Minori the moment he reached school. He had decided to use his loudest voice to shout ' Good Morning!' to her. Though he wasn't sure if he could carry on the conversation from there, but on the first day of school, he must greet her with a smiling face.

That was the only thing he could do, to look forward with hope--

"Yo! Good morning, Takasu-kun!:

--Oh God!!!

"Ah, it's really cold today--! Where's Taiga? Why isn't she with you?"

Ryuuji was now the second reincarnation of the second Takasu generation. As confusing as that sounds, it was that kind of situation. After crossing the road, Ryuuji did a beautiful Marseille Roulette, avoiding her with his skillful footwork, turning around her like a tornado. And then he shouted out soundlessly, I'm the biggest idiot in the universe!!!

It was stupid to just walk by the usual route that he always took to school together with Taiga and Minori. If Taiga hadn't gotten out of bed, wouldn't it be obvious that 'she' would be waiting here? Wouldn't it be normal for Kushieda Minori to be at this junction?

"Wa, Wait up! Takasu-kun!"

Ryuuji pretended to be too engrossed in adjusting his muffler to respond, when in truth his body would not let him stop or turn around. He could only walk away at an inhuman pace.

What kind of 'Greet her~!' is this, what kind of 'I must greet her with a smiling face~' is this. Idiot, idiot, idiot. You should just die. As he was too busy scolding himself, Ryuuji didn't notice Minori's expression, nor her schoolbag slipping from her fingers. He also didn't notice the way she clutched the hem of her skirt tightly. He couldn't even breathe the air within a metre of her body.

"Hey--! Takasu-kun, you....."

For some reason, Takasu's body stiffened for a moment. But he still continued to swiftly make himself scarce from the scene. Ryuuji used his rock-hard back to block the line of vision of Minori as he slipped away like

a column of smoke. Maybe Inko-chan's 'Zidane' incident in the morning was a prophecy of this situation?..... Ryuuji could only think of such lame things, unable to accept that he was being such a jerk.

"Don't run--------away from me!"

--Even if you say that. Even Taiga's voice from the night before that was resounding in Ryuuji's head only spurred him on to run even faster.

"Stupid Ryuuji------! Don't run away--!"

I'm not stupid.....For some reason, Taiga's voice didn't seem to be coming from inside his head. Just as Ryuuji thought of that.

"Ah, Good, Good Morning Minorin.....Ahhhhhhhhhhh!"

A high-pitched wail pierced the morning air. And then , Ah---! Minori also started shouting as a certain small-sized idiot fell down in the middle of the road. Not that there was anything wrong with falling down, but that idiot just had to fall down in the blind spot of the

truck that had just turned into the junction. Ryuuji and Minori throw down their schoolbags and ran to that idiot at the same time, triggering a slow-motion scene.

Looking like a kitten about to be crushed under the giant wheels of a truck, Taiga was motionless as she stared at the approaching vehicle. Ryuuji jumped in front of the slow moving truck, mashing himself onto the windscreen, scaring the driver into stepping on his service brake, while Minori took the chance to drag Taiga to the side of the road.

It's dangerous to jump out like this, young man---! The driver shouted before driving away in a cloud of black exhaust.

Ryuuji felt as though his heart was going to explode as his whole body was shivering.

".....I, I almost died....."

"You.....You idiot!"

Ryuuji couldn't help but shout, and at the same time,

"What were you thinking! How could you.....!"

Minori's voice also sounded. Sitting at the side of the road with the front of her coat dirtied, but was unable to get up, Taiga slowly looked at Ryuuji, then at Minori. And then softly muttered,

"I'm sorry....."

"It's not a joke you know! You almost got crushed by a truck!?"

"Why did you have to run out so suddenly! Come on, stand up! Are you hurt?"

Grabbing hold of Minori's hand, Taiga finally stood up . She patted the dust of her skirt with a pitiful expression on her face.

"Come on, put your coat on right! And your muffler too! You're a mess.....ah!"

Ryuuji suddenly realized that there was a scratch on one of the hands that was buttoning her light gray duffel coat and re-wrapping the fuchsia pink muffler that she finally bought for herself. He grabbed that hand without thinking.

"You're bleeding!"

"Seriously! Tissue Tissue!"

I have a tissue. Just as Ryuuji prepared to say that, he suddenly stopped breathing.

He finally realized the magnitude of what he just did because Minori was watching him hold Taiga's hand. Both of Ryuuji's hands started to tremble, and also saw the slight trembling in Taiga's eyes. Minori took out a piece of tissue from her pocket and used it to wipe the cut on Taiga's hand.

Minori seemed to have cut short her hair.

The ends of her hair that danced around the side of her cheeks gave her a more boyish look than before.

Beneath her fringe, Minori's dark eyes shined brightly.

And then--that was the limit.

Turning around suddenly, Ryuuji left Taiga and Minori by themselves and walked away. Though it was an extremely unnatural thing to do, but he was already

unable to stay in that place anymore. Ryuuji didn't even bother to pat the dust of his fallen schoolbag as he ran away from Minori for the second time.

Pretending not to see or hear anything, Ryuuji ran off.

However, Taiga didn't shout out anything this time. As she adjusted the position of her schoolbag and looked behind her, Minori had her back to her and looked to be picking up her schoolbag. And then Taiga stood up on the pavement and clutched her head and shouted soundlessly---ahhhhhh, I screwed up, I failed, and other phrases to that effect. Ryuuji silently agreed with her. You didn't grow up at all, for mature adults would never jump onto the road like that to be crushed.

But at the same time, Ryuuji also wanted to assume the same position and shout, idiot idiot idiot, I'm such an idiot! to the heavens.

Ah, how about burning down the school.....Ryuuji thought as he ran away from the scene.

Chapter 2

"Ocean! Sun! Okinawa!"

"Beach! Island! Okinawa!"

Two copies of the parent consent form was slapped onto Ryuuji's head the moment he entered the classroom.

"......What're the two of you trying to do?"

Ryuuji gave them an unpleasant gaze through his crescent-shaped eyes. That would've have made any other person cry out in fear, but Noto and Haruta, having gotten used to that gaze, merely stood there calmly.

"What's wrong, Takasu, don't put on such a dull face! Did you bring the consent form!"

"Happy new year! That's Okinawa mind you! A free six day five night holiday!"

I don't think it's free--Ryuuji looked at the blissfully moronic face of Haruta, which had not changed at all even though it was a new year. Right now, Ryuuji felt slightly envious of his happy-go-lucky friends who obviously did not know anything of that feeling named '

frustration'. But Haruta seemed to have misunderstood the emotions contained within Ryuuji's gaze, his expression changing rapidly.

"Ah, don't do this, Taka-chan! This is my consent form!
"

"Why would I want to take yours.....I brought mine."

Really, Ryuuji was a tad envious of him.

After speaking, Ryuuji placed his bag onto his seat. Even Noto and Haruta should be able to sense the unadulterated trace of unhappiness in the air. But this kind of thing could not be easily explained. Things like how he had been rejected on Christmas eve by the Kushieda Minori who was about to walk into class, and the emotional state that he had been in ever since that incident were not things that he could talk to Noto and Haruta about. And to compound his misery, Ryuuji had just ran away when Minori greeted him with her usual cheerful voice.

He sat down at his desk and clutched his head in his hands. The more he thought about it, the more he seemed to have acted like a petty person. It was the worst thing to ignore her just because she rejected him.

Petty, shallow, lousy.....Ryuuji was rubbing salt into his own wounds by thinking about what he had just done. It was because so many things have happened that he didn't know what to do. If this goes on, would she start to hate him?

"Arghhhhhhhh!"

Ryuuji scratched his head furiously with both hands as Noto tried to restrain him.

"Takasu, what are you talking about? What happened to you? Ah, don't tell me it's the after-effects of the flu that you just recovered from?"

"Now that you mention it, I was extremely surprised when you told me that 'I just got discharged after being hospitalized for flu.' when I asked you to go to the temple together on New Year's day. But I guess you'll cheer up when you see this right! I'm really looking forward to the school trip, so I've already bought this! Look at this baby!"

Haruta forcibly pushed Ryuuji's hands away from his head and stuffed a book into his face. The book in question was a guidebook, which Ryuuji instinctively

tried to push away, but his hands stopped halfway into the motion. 'Sparkling Okinawa!" Ryuuji's gaze stopped at the cover photo of the guidebook.

The sun shining down from an endlessly blue sky onto the impossibly green coral reefs and the dreamily perfect beaches. And the young people in swimsuits that had their hair ruffled by the sea breeze. Men and women leaned into each other affably, the tide coming up to their knees.....they were also holding watermelons in their hands.....!

Such, a dazzling sight!

".....Ahahahahahaha!"

Ryuuji couldn't help but laugh. He laughed till tears were flowing out of the corners of his eyes, not because of grief, but because he had seen a beautiful scene that couldn't be any further away from his situation.

The people in the photos were too radiant to be real, and they looked to be as happy as anyone could be. Right now, Ryuuji felt like he was that thin shadow by their feet on the sands. If the surface of the shining youth so

often talked about referred to the people on the cover, then Ryuuji must be the other side of the coin. It was so ironic that it was actually funny.

Whichever way Noto interpreted that burst of laughter , he started to laugh along happily, waving his hands about as if there was a fish in between them --- an image that could not be further away from its proposed intention of appearing cute.

"Look at the color of that ocean! We're so lucky to be able to go to Okinawa for our school trip! My friends from middle school who're in high school now are still going to places like Kyoto and Nara that we've already gone for our middle school trip! There's nothing but temples in those places!"

"That's too bad! I have one place that I definitely must go in Okinawa! Manzama!"

It's Manzamo isn't it.....Ryuuji couldn't help but mentally correct him.

"And the American military base! It should be really cool to get a look at the US Marines!"

I don't think they'll just let you go in for a tour.....Once again, Ryuuji couldn't help but mentally correct him. Finally, when Haruta mentioned 'I really want to fire a gun!', Noto cut off his rambling by saying 'I think you've mixed up Okinawa with some other place'.

"Good morning! I see you guys are already looking at a guidebook of Okinawa! What passionate studying!"

Upon hearing the distinct voice of a certain sportsman, Ryuuji turned around at waved in greeting. The person whose friendly eyes were framed behind a pair of spectacles and raised his hand in response to Ryuuji's greeting was the student council president and class president, Kitamura Yuusaku.

"Takasu, I heard that you caught a cold at the end of last year? Are you better already?"

".....ah.....that....."

"Hmm, what's up? Are you alright? Ha! Don't tell me because of your high fever....."

Kitamura wrinkled his eyebrows and shot a searing gaze at the region between Ryuuji's legs. Ryuuji took

only a moment to understand the meaning behind that gaze and told him to bug off, closing his legs together.

"Morning, great leader. Are you planning to do that thing again this year?"

Noto clapped his hands together and bowed. That action clearly referred to,

"Of course I'll be doing the Great Illuminator Deity of Broken Hearts thing again! It's my duty to encourage the people with broken hearts in our midst, so that they can break free from the abyss of rejection.....what's wrong, Takasu, why're you staring at me like that?"

"......It's nothing"

Ryuuji hurriedly shook his head, shifting his gaze away from Kitamura's eyes, which were almost twice the size of Noto's. No.....because he had reacted to the word ' rejection'.

"But there's a problem with continuing to do the Great Illuminator Deity of Broken Hearts programme as the participants of the most popular segment of the show, the 'your love life support group' segment is finding it hard to get participants. Not mentioning the people from

the student council, I've already gone through my juniors from the baseball club, this'll threaten the survival of the programme if the situation continues to worsen!"

"Then just find a participant. Ah, just nice, I've already found one!"

Ryuuji looked towards the direction that Noto pointed in and couldn't help but shut his eyes, his hands grabbing on to his kneecaps with all his strength. I really really want to sink into the ground and disappear, but--

"Morning, Kushieda, looks like you cut your hair! Don't tell me you got dumped!? Why don't you join Kitamura's programme!"

"Hmm, that's Kushieda's definition of cutting hair? There's practically no difference at all, why don't you go all the way, just like the skinhead wig that I gave you! Right, Taka-chan!"

--Haruta placed himself behind Ryuuji, cutting off his only escape road.....

Lifting his eyes while shivering at the same time, Ryuuji clenched his jaw and sneaked a peek. Minori was removing her wool muffler while speaking in her usual

bright voice as though she had completely forgotten about Ryuuji's performance a while ago,

"Why are you guys so naggy--! Could you not talk about my hair in that kind of despicable manner!?"

Hey, is she an idiot, yes I think she's an idiot. Noto and Haruta pointed at Minori and laughed. Even Kitamura laughed along as he opened his arms.

"I'm always here for you if you're out of love! Come, jump into my arms! Then join my show!"

"Good job, Mr. Deity! What a strong chest you have!"

"Minori's out of love~!"

--Slowly

Luckily the substance that slowly flowed out wasn't tears, but blood that came from biting down too hard on one's lip. Ryuuji didn't join in their conversation, nor did he look at Minori's face, but merely stood there with his head bowed, biting down on his lip like a stone statue. The vocabulary that was flying around above him were too dangerous, so he took great care to avoid being hit by any one of them.

"Tsk, Taiga, let's go. Those guys are idiots! They don't even know that the haircut cost me four thousand five hundred yen!"

She grabbed Taiga and prepared to go to her seat. Taiga nodded in agreement, wrapping her arms around Minori's waist as she commented 'They're like bandits!'. But the guys today (with the exception of Ryuuji) were extremely high for some unknown reason (probably a combination of the excitement of going to Okinawa and a new school term).

"That's right, Taiga should join the programme too! You could be on air together with Kitamura!"

"Heh, that's right, what a great idea! Come, Taiga, fly towards this strong chest of mine!"

With a flourish, Haruta pulled open the front of Kitamura's school blazer, even though doing so only exposed the school shirt beneath.

"No! Taiga, that's a trap!"

"Ah! That hurts, Minori! You poked me in the eye!"

Minori covered Taiga's eyes with both of her hands.

"This is something that shouldn't be seen, I've already fallen into that trap once! Just when I thought that it was nothing, an extremely dark and scary object appeared in front of my eyes!"

Ha Ha Ha, Kitamura laughed, still in his blazer-less state.

"Hey, don't describe it like that. When have I ever shown you an extremely dark and scary object?"

"During the summer! At Ami's summer house!"

Did something like that really happen? Kitamura tilted his head innocently.

"Ahhhh.....? Ohhhhhhhh.....?"

Haruta, who was standing in front of Kitamura, suddenly scrambled to get a closer look at Kitamura's school shirt.

"Hey! Looks like even the great Deity has his moments ! Such an embarrassing fellow! Oh, Taka-chan, what's this sinful object on his shirt?"

"What's that!?"

That particular thing had already been tagged as a ' sinful object', so there really was nothing more to be said about it. Ryuuji instinctively jumped up as Haruta pointed at the offending object(s), where two strange-looking circular dark objects had appeared in the front of Kitamura's school shirt. Upon closer inspection, Ryuuji felt that it could possibly be soy sauce. But the objects were situated at the exact positions of where a persons nipples would be, and speaking of that, the objects really looked like nipples--

".....Aren't these his nipples!"

Argh! Ryuuji couldn't help but gag at the sight. It was so dirty that all he wanted to do was to pluck out the pair of eyes that had observed the objects and clean them. Kitamura hastily drew his school blazer around himself, his face turning red.

"Oh no! I forgot to wear a T-shirt inside!"

"I can't take it anymore!"

Minori crossed her arms in front of her chest as she fell backwards. Beside her, Taiga started laughing loudly. At this time, Noto walked to Taiga and lightly poked her elbow, looking as though he had something to say.

"......Hi! You're in luck, Taiga, you're in luck!"

"What!?"

If Taiga hadn't asked, Ryuuji would have. Haruta immediately bent down beside Taiga, opening up the Okinawa guidebook in front of her,

"Taiga~ Read this!"

"Huh!? Chin, Chin chin.....!"

"Oh~! Ha! Everyone heard that right!? She really said it!"

Haruta hugged the guidebook, which was opened up to the page that introduced the 'Chinsuko' under the ' Must-buy gifts' section, and laughed brazenly. He probably wanted very much to die today. In that instant,

Ryuuji thought he saw blood spurting out from the sides of Taiga's eyes--no, that's the blood-red killing aura that was emanating from that girl.

Taiga grabbed Noto and Haruta's thumbs with one hand each, took a deep breath.....and unleashed a ki-attack. Noto and Haruta's bodies blew through the air as though enchanted, crashing into each other before dropping to the ground. The two of them lay there, unmoving, probably dead already. Following that, Taiga lifted her head and shouted,

".....Chinsuko!"

Minori laughed lightly, and said 'Good job!'. Kitamura was still in his embarrassed state, covering his chest from external inspection.

What just happened.....Unable to follow the slew of events that had just happened, Ryuuji could only stand there in a daze, after which he subconsciously lifted his head and look in Minori's direction.

Suddenly.

Just like a man who suddenly saw the rough current beneath the wooden boards of the bridge that he is

crossing, Ryuuji thought of something he shouldn't have thought of.

It's normal for everyone else to be normal and cheerful . But why can Minori also keep up her usual cheerfulness . How could she be able to act normally around the guy she just rejected--Why?

To Minori, was that merely a small incident that could be forgotten in the short span of two weeks?

"....."

Sensing Ryuuji's gaze, Minori also lifted her head. Their eyes met, but Minori gave her usual smile immediately. 'What's up?', just like the kind of smile that friends gave each other their eyes occasionally met, as she used a lighthearted tone to speak.

The incident just now--She seemed to have completely forgotten Ryuuji's rude and hurtful actions.

And then Ryuuji reached his limit. He could only turn his back on Minori and run away from her once again. Running away from his circle of friends, this overly-sensitive man could only hide in the toilet.

"Ah, what a coincidence! Takasu-kun, do you still remember me?"

As Ryuuji was walking towards the door, a male student looked in from the corridor and waved to him.

"Ah, I'm the one who was wearing the bear costume at the party--"

"Oh, so you're the one....."

Ryuuji remembered and walked towards him. On the night of Christmas Eve, Ryuuji had tried to look for a Santa Claus costume to wear to Taiga's apartment. But he was unable to find it, so Ryuuji had asked to change clothes with the guy who was wearing the bear costume. Because of everything that had happened after that, Ryuuji had forgotten all about it.

"I'm so sorry, I had completely forgotten about it. Sorry for making you come looking for me.

"It's nothing, since that costume's only used for those kind of parties. On the other hand, your suit looked pretty expensive, so my mother wanted me to return it to you as soon as possible."

"Ah, you even took it to the dry cleaners.....I'm really sorry, and thank you very much."

Ryuuji furiously stared at the guy as he took back the suit. Oh no, I really must bring that costume to the dry cleaners before returning it to him.

"That's right, here. It seemed to have been in that pocket, so I don't know whether it was troublesome for you to lose it. Though I went to look for you after realizing that it was still in the pocket, but you were already gone."

".....Ah....."

That was the Christmas present he had planned to give to Minori as he confessed his feelings.

Holding the box in his hands, Ryuuji said,

".....No, it's nothing. It.....wasn't needed on that day."

Ryuuji shook his head lightly, it's true, he said to himself mentally.

This was truly something that wasn't required anymore. Even if he had it on hand that time, he wouldn't have been able to give it to her.

"Is that so.....that's great! Actually, I was rather nervous when I came up here. I was thinking of what I would do if Takasu really turned out to be a delinquent. Looks like Murase and the others were telling the truth when they said 'he's a nice guy, don't worry'."

Ryuuji lowered his head slightly as he laughed rather awkwardly. Though he was definitely not a delinquent, but he wasn't sure if he could be classified as a 'nice guy'. Would a nice guy completely ignore the girl who rejected him? Perhaps he should be classified as a ' narrow-minded guy'.

After exchanging names once again and promising to return him the bear costume, Ryuuji watched Murase's friend walk away. Then, he stood by himself outside the classroom.

Inside the box that was in his hand was the brooch that he had braved the frightened stare of the shopkeeper for two whole hours to pick out. Though the brooch was only a cheap one that cost around a thousand yen, but it

wouldn't have been appropriate to give something expensive when they weren't dating. He still remembered that Minori's fringe was stubbornly knotted together. Though he had felt that a pencil box or a small pouch would also be good choices, but Ryuuji had wanted to give her something shiny and pretty. Even if it was only a cheap brooch, it was something as beautiful as Christmas.

I should just throw it away.

He thought, I should throw it away immediately.

Instinctively, Ryuuji didn't want to hold on to the object that brought back painful memories of that night.

But just as he prepared to chuck it into the rubbish bin, his hands stopped by themselves. Ryuuji clicked his tongue as he violently tore off the Christmas wrapping. Why am I even thinking of classifying litter at a time like this.....He opened the box and took out the brooch, throwing the wrapping into the flammable rubbish bin.

Ryuuji's fingertips clutched the inflammable brooch tightly as he stared at it. On the silver wave-shaped brooch were a number of golden glass pearls, casting a shiny glow under the light.

Ryuuji felt that the brooch reflected Minori in it. Among all the other kinds of brooches, only this one suited her best. If she could wear it in school, at club practice, at work--he had once thought. If she could think about him as she put it on--He had once thought. Looking at her wearing the brooch, Ryuuji would feel that his feelings had been successfully conveyed to her--He had once thought.

But he wasn't able to give this to her. He didn't need this anymore. Just as Ryuuji prepared to throw the brooch into the dustbin,

"Taka-chan, save me! Look look, Taiga did this! I have proof! Look at the teeth marks!"

"It's your own fault for being so irritating! What's wrong with you, insect! I'll destroy you! It'll be harmful to the earth if you exist for even a second longer!"

Just as he prepared to throw the brooch into the dustbin, Haruta, who was being hunted down by Taiga, ran into Ryuuji from behind. Even Taiga ran over. And then the two of them noticed the brooch in Ryuuji's hand at the same time. Haruta was the first to speak,

"What's this, what's this? What're you doing with it?"

And then Taiga also made a surprised sound before closing her mouth. Ryuuji had told her about buying a brooch for Minori. Taiga then looked at the dustbin, and saw the Christmas wrapping on top, seeming to understand the symbolic meaning behind it. Taiga had a tendency to be unusually perceptive in such situations.

".....This, This is.....something useless....."

"Useless!? Then give it to me! You see, I've also felt that my fringe is always knotted together!"

The uninformed Haruta snatched the brooch from Ryuuji and clipped it onto his hair while saying, 'how does it look?'. Ryuuji couldn't help but think that the brooch ended up half a world away from where it was supposed to go as he looked at the moronic Haruta.

"Give--it back!"

"Ouch!? Hey, what's with you!?"

"Just give it back! Return it!"

Jumping onto Haruta's back, Taiga looked like a long-haired idiot trying to climb a tree as she attempted to get the brooch of his fringe. Haruta, whose hair was pinned together by the brooch, screeched in agony. Though Ryuuji wanted to stop Taiga, but--

"That's, still, Ryuuji's brooch! That's why, you should, return it--"

Just as the classroom door opened and the class teacher came in with her class list, the brooch finally came off Haruta's head, taking a few strands of his hair with it.

* * *

"It's been burned to the ground!"

--The students of 2-C could only stare blankly at Koigakubo Yuri, single (30 years-old), who was standing at the podium in front of class with an awkward smile.

But they were unable to decipher the meaning of her words.

'Come, please hand up the parental consent forms!' The class president, Kitamura, who was busily trying to carry out the first orders of the term from his class teacher, froze in his position.

The single woman (30), quickly thanked him and grabbed the stack of consent forms, immediately stuffing the forms into an envelope before uttering those cursed words.

"Because it was burned to the ground, that's why it's not there anymore. It's such a shame. But, it won't be canceled. That's why, umm, that, it's probably alright. Yes, just like what was originally planned. Yes."

".....Sensei, I totally do not understand what you've just told us, please explain it more clearly.

Hearing Kitamura's direct question, the single woman (30) gave up on trying to hide the news.

"It's the hotel!"

Looking as though she'd made up her mind, she said that with a commanding tone,

"The hotel that was reserved for the school trip to Okinawa! It was burnt down at the end of last year, so it's not there anymore. And there isn't a hotel that can take in a hundred and sixty eight students in Okinawa anymore! That's why the school trip has been changed to a three day two night ski trip!

That's great isn't it!"

Ehhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!?

--The wails of agony was amplified by similar cries coming out of the neighbouring classrooms. An anguished screech was heard from a neighbouring class as even the ceiling seemed to tremble.

"You have got to be kidding!? Are you serious!?"

"That's the worst thing to happen!?"

"Ahhhhhhhh! My first ever plane ride, my first ever visit to Okinawa!"

"And speaking of that, why are we going up the mountain during the coldest month of winter!? Are they trying to kill us!?"

The single woman (30) tried to hush them, and continued,

"Isn't skiing just as good? You'll get to ski at a large ski lodge! You'll get to see silvery-white snow scenery! And you'll get to make angels in the snow! And the happy voices of your classmates! and other things."

"No! That's too boring! This is a once-in-a-lifetime school trip!?"

"I must go to Okinawa! No matter how long we have to wait, just let us go to Okinawa!"

"That's right! I don't want to go to some snowy mountain! Let's protest!"

Though it was an extreme solution, it had the support of most of the class. However, the single woman (30) merely glanced at the envelope securely tucked under her arm.

"But I've already received all your parental consent forms.....so that's that....."

The despicable action taken by the adult pushed the students to their limit. Everyone started wailing miserably.

Haruta, who had already bought Okinawa guidebook, was already bawling, Kitamura, who was also looking forward to the trip, was shouting 'I object! It's too unreasonable!' towards the podium. On the other hand, the girls started to verbally assault the class teacher with shouts of 'Single woman!' 'Thirty years-old!', and even Taiga, the rich girl could probably go to Okinawa any time she wanted to, was banging hard on her desk in defiance.

The single woman (30), who was bathed in such extremist defiance, gave a pitiful expression.

"It's not like I burnt down the Okinawa hotel....."

--Which was the truth.

Within the chaos, only one person, Ryuuji, who was like the citizen of another world, suddenly opened his

eyes to their fullest extent. It's impossible for the single woman (30) to burn down the hotel.

It was me.

.....Ryuuji considered this seriously. Perhaps, the curse of 'let the school burn down!' that he had released in the morning had ripped through the fabric of time and space to descend onto the hotel in Okinawa, causing it to burn to the ground?

In his heart, Ryuuji apologised to the students whose faces were full of tears. To him, the howling snow mountain suited him more than sunny Okinawa right now. The cursed had come through, though he felt sorry for his classmates, but Ryuuji was rather happy about it. Ryuuji didn't want to think about blue skies and clear waters, for he wasn't in the mood to be shone upon by the blazing sun and to laugh loudly and happily with his friends right now.

Darkened skies, unrelenting snowstorms. Slightly wet clothes. Musty rented ski suits. Bear. Avalanche. Closed room killings.....These are the right things. The high pitched whistle of the ghost ship Titanic. The maniacal laughter of its spirit crew. These are the right things. To

hell with the school trip. How nice it would be to get locked up on a freezing snow-capped mountain, to play hide-and-seek in an underwater labyrinth, to wander around in hell.

The once-in-a-lifetime school trip? Who cares about that kind of thing.

"Damn it! Why must Ami-chan be late on a day like this!?"

"Ami-chan wouldn't stand by passively on something like this!"

"Ami-chan would surely do something!"

Just what were they expecting from the two-faced model, Kawashima Ami who hadn't appeared in class? The guys had even started to shout Ami-chan--! Ami-chan--! into space. But the single woman (30) immediately dashed their hopes as she spoke,

"Kawashima-san was in Hawaii for work-related reasons and was unable to catch the returning flight, so she won't be here today. But she's probably sick and tired of southern islands, so perhaps a snowy mountain would be more to her liking!?"

"That's nonsense!"

The voices of the entire student body rejected her half-baked hypothesis. The single woman (30) thus gave up on any further attempt to round up this mess. She turned her back onto the class and scribbled a line onto the blackboard.

'Life is unfair!!!'

* * *

"Ah!"

An involuntary sound escaped Ryuuji's mouth, as everyone turned their eyes upon him. What's wrong with that fellow, why is she back already--a familiar statuesque figure could be seen through the shelves, no doubt, it was Kawashima Ami.

Ryuuji was buying the ingredients needed for dinner at the supermarket with the sky amber in color. In the midst of the biting winter winds, the pedestrians on the shopping street were all rushing to get home. Just before Ryuuji stepped into the supermarket, he glanced at the neighbouring bookstore, only to see an extremely conspicuous figure.

In front of the shelve stocking woman's magazines stood a taller than average figure. And on that body was a smaller than average head. From just the side of the face that had a pair of shiny sunglasses on, the beautiful jaw line of that person could be clearly observed. A muffler was wrapped around her shiny hair, as her tanned skin shone with a bronze sparkly. Below the probably jaw-droppingly expensive coat was a pair of retro jeans and boots, though she wasn't wearing high heels, her legs were still extremely long. That kind of unique style, coupled with her nonchalant handling of a Chanel bag, just screamed

'There's a pretty girl here!!' 'I'm a model you know!'.

Looks like Ami-chan hadn't changed at all. But Ryuuji felt that it would be hard to start a conversation with her,

and prepared to retreat. The last time he saw her--The memory of parting with Ami at the Christmas party was not a good one. Ami couldn't stand Ryuuji's stupidity anymore, and had left by herself. The Ryuuji of that time hadn't realized that he had abandoned Taiga to be by herself, had assumed that the world revolved around himself--the Ryuuji of that day was extremely stupid. But too much had happened at that time, so much that he couldn't even open his mouth to ask Ami to stay. It was expected for her to be angry.

Ami, who always gave of an aura of arrogance, had probably predicted that the situation would become like this. Ami probably already knew what kind of result that Ryuuji's stupidity would bring. And then, she probably would have been surprised by the extent of his stupidity. Ami's words had always been hurtful, so much so that other people would want to ignore them. It was hurtful probably because those words were always direct and truthful.

"....."

Ami moved, and Ryuuji hurriedly stuffed his face into a recipe book.

Ami walked over from the woman's magazine section while listening to her iPod, looking as though she hadn't noticed Ryuuji's existence. As he had a bad feeling about it, Ryuuji was unable to lift his head and strike up a conversation with her, and could only stand there. But life always had a tendency to go the other way, as Ami walked towards the recipe section, her hand reaching towards a magazine that was in front of Ryuuji. Her target seemed to be the recipe book 'Set meals - Genmai Bento'.

And then.

"Oh I'm sorr.....Ah"

--Ryuuji blinked in surprise.

Ami's bag had knocked into Ryuuji's hand as she reached over to take the book, knocking Ryuuji's magazine to the ground. Ami finally realized that it was him when she turned to apologise. Though her expression was veiled behind that pair of shiny shades, but Ami immediately covered her mouth after saying 'ah' in surprise.

".....You should give up. The 'Set meals' series isn't nice to eat at all."

Though his voice still gave of a slightly awkward tone, but this was the most normal voice that Ryuuji could manage.

"Tsk!"

After confirming that it was indeed Ryuuji, Ami put the magazine back on to the shelf and clicked her tongue aggressively.

"......Oh......!"

She made a sound, making her dislike obvious. Ami then turned around, but the strap of her bag got tangled together with the loose end of Ryuuji's belt. Ami turned around belligerently and pulled her bag towards herself, hugging it in front of her chest.

"What are you trying to do to Ami-chan's Chanel!?"

"It should be what you're trying to do to me!?"

Facing up to the horrifying gaze that shot out from behind the sunglasses, Ryuuji's insides involuntarily shuddered, throwing his demonic appearance aside. In response to the sudden quarrel between the beautiful

model girl and the demon-faced male, all the shoppers stopped whatever they were doing and looked at the two of them. But Ami didn't care about things like that.

"Ah--That's---the worst! And why are you here? Can't you just disappear?"

The bad feeling was accurate. Hearing that, Ryuuji's face began to contort as well.

"What are you trying to say!? What kind of attitude is that! I, I was!"

Rejected by Kushieda on Christmas Eve!.....He couldn't say that out loud.

"I was hospitalized for flu! I had a high fever of forty degrees, and I even lost consciousness! How could you treat a patient like me with that kind of attitude, don't you feel ashamed of yourself!"

"How would I know about something like that!..... Speaking of which, high fever? Forty degrees? Then....."

Ami took of her sunglasses, lightly biting on its frame, one eyebrow rising slightly. Her beautiful eyelids fluttered slightly, but she didn't say anything, mere staring at the region between Ryuuji's legs.

"Don't be stupid! I didn't lose my reproductive capacity!"

Ryuuji crossed his legs, defending against the wordless laser that was stronger than any argument. No wonder they were childhood friends, as Ami and Kitamura's way of responding to such things were exactly the same.

"......Ah is that right. Ha, that's good then. I'll be seeing you, bye bye."

Ami slid her sunglasses into the back pocket of her jeans, a feigned smile appearing on her lips as she coldly turned away.

Ryuuji's world turned black for a moment. Just what kind of woman is she.....what an uncomfortable fellow. Even though he already knew of Ami's dual personality

and atrocious character, Ryuuji was still taken by surprise. Was she merely irritated? Did she have to dislike him to such an extent because of what he did?

"Wait up! Why do you have to be so aggressive!"

"Ah-Do you want me to tell you why? Because I, loathe Takasu-kun.

"Wh.....What!?"

--That was too direct an answer, leaving no room for interpretation. Ryuuji couldn't help but stand there, staring at Ami like an idiot.

"Wh.....Why.....?"

"Huh? Please don't follow me, it's extremely irritating."

".....You.....just, I....."

"Ouch! What are you doing, stop fooling around!"

Because of the searing effect of her words, Ryuuji unconsciously stretched out his hand, accidentally touching the back pocket where Ami kept her wallet and cellphone. He was glared at, while Ami looked as though

she had sealed all routes of movement in the bookshop, as she pointed at Ryuuji in front of everyone in the store.

"Do you still need me to explain myself more clearly!? I loathe you because you're an idiot!"

The hurtful attack rooted Ryuuji to the ground.

".....Kya! Somebody was actually loathed for being an idiot.....Hahaha!"

A burst of cruel laughter came from some distance away. Ryuuji turned around to look at the owner of that laugh, the small-sized person who only tied up one side of her hair, wearing woolen cap, a white wool coat and boots--in other words, that Taiga.

Ryuuji asked, why are you here?

"You're really slow! You're ten minutes late!"

"Don't get riled up over such small matters. You're just a Baka-chi who doesn't even know how to read the time."

"I know how to read the time!"

Ryuuji was surprised by the conversation taking place between Ami and Taiga. The two who have been locked in battle since time immemorial would actually meet up in a bookstore?

"Here, this is 14 US dollars. And, this is 40 US dollars."

"Right.....if 1 US dollar is equivalent to 100 yen....."

Looking at Taiga taking out thousand yen notes from her kitty patterned purse, Ryuuji couldn't help but sigh,

".....Just when did the relationship between the two of you become so good that you bring each other presents from overseas?"

"These are not presents, this is money, Baka-chi~I only have a ten thousand yen note, don't forget to give me the change!"

"Huh? Since you asked me to buy stuff for you, shouldn't you have prepared the exact amount before hand?

How do you expect me to give you so much change? Ami pouted as she took out her wallet. After much effort, the two of the finally settled the matter. Ami raised her head, looking at Ryuuji's face.

".....Tsk"

'Why must you come here?!' Ami seemed to be extremely angry. As she looked at Ryuuji's childish attitude, Ami's expression changed to that of someone who's had enough, as she kicked him with her heeled boots. 'ouch!' But she missed, and stepped on Taiga's foot instead. 'Ah! What's wrong?' Ami turned around and looked at Taiga. 'Oh, so I hit you!' and proceeded to lift up her leg nonchalantly.

Welcome to Sudobucks! The voices of the female university student store workers and jazz music filled the shop.

The three of them who had originally met at the bookstore had ended up at their usual place at the non-smoking zone of Sudobucks. Taiga ordered a cup of coffee and some baked biscuits, Ryuuji a cup of mixed coffee, while Ami took a latte. Taiga and Ryuuji sat together, as Ami looked at him with an extremely

irritated expression (had he done something extremely stupid to make her hate him so?)

".....What did you ask her to buy for you?"

Though he wasn't that interested, but after sneaking a peek at Taiga's bag, he saw a range of random products whose prices ranged from 14 to 40 US Dollars.

"Handbags and slippers! The products that were on the Hawaii limited edition magazines! Ah, this this!"

Taiga suddenly became extremely excited as she jumped up and showed off her wares.

".....Ah, that's nice. Though it won't be of much use..... ah, but it's alright since you're so happy. At least you can use it in the summer."

Ami, who was drinking her latte, widened her eyes in confusion,

"What? Why wouldn't it be of much use? Weren't we going to Okinawa for the school trip? Wouldn't these be just right for the trip? I spent a long time looking for the things you wanted!"

"Ah, haven't you heard? The school trip has been changed to a three day two night ski trip."

"......Huh?"

"The hotel in Okinawa burned down. So we're going to be trapped in the freezing mountains."

"Why is that so! You can't be serious!? Yahhhhhhh! NoOOoooo!!! I bought a pair of shorts and t-shirts specially for Okinawa!? And speaking of which, why is it three day two night? Why is it such a short trip? And, why must we ski!? I don't want this! I hate this!!!"

"......I'm sorry....."

"......Why is Takasu-kun apologizing to me?"

"......Why are you apologizing!?"

Unable to answer their questions, Ryuuji looked away, sipping his coffee while bemoaning his bad luck. 'It burnt down because I cursed it' If he said something like this, who knows what kind of look they would've given him... ...However, Ryuuji truly believed that the fire was because of him--

Ka! Ami lifted her hands in surrender. In front of Ryuuji and Taiga, the girl who always pretended to be someone else and hid behind a mask started to whine in a manner befitting her true character.

"Ah---I've had enough! This is worst~No, it's even worse than the worst!!! Why must we ski, of all things! I am totally not interested in going to a place like that! I just want to skip this period of time! Ahhhhh~~maybe I should just make an excuse regarding my work and skip it."

"......whatever you want to do to skip the trip is your freedom, Baka-chi--but, I have something to tell you regarding this school trip!"

At this moment, Taiga's expression became serious, as her body leaned forward. 'Hey!'.....One end of the lace in her one-piece dress went into her cup of coffee, as Ryuuji hurriedly fished it out.

"This is the reason I called you out for. Ryuuji was just a coincidence, but just nice that he's here as well."

Taiga looked over to Ryuuji. Ryuuji was conducting emergency procedures on Taiga's lace, and moved the coffee cup away to prevent any repeat incidents. He

didn't notice Ami looking at the entire scene with a slightly dazed expression.

Taiga squinted her eyes, and then spoke to Ami with a calm and serious tone,

"Though we're not going to Okinawa anymore, it's still a school trip. The main goal of leaving behind good memories is still in effect. That's why, Baka-chi! I have to tell you that if you go with us on the school trip, you mustn't trouble Ryuuji in any way!"

"......huh? Trouble! I should be the one feeling troubled "

Ami directed a look full of hatred at Ryuuji as she hugged her cute Chanel bag. Wait a minute! Ryuuji hadn't asked Taiga to say anything like that, so he was just as confused as Ami. Anyway, the first thing to do is to calm down, Ryuuji thought as he slowly sipped his coffee.

"Because Ryuuji, likes Minorin"

"Choke......!"

"Argh, Ryuuji that's disgusting!"

Cough! Cough! -- Using a tissue to cover his mouth, the eyes that were filled with tears from the coughing glared at Taiga, "What are you saying!"

"......Oh......"

Looking like a snake that has found its prey, Ami's mouth curved upwards in amusement. To Ryuuji it was the first time today, and probably the first time this year that he had seen her so happy, as her eyes shone wickedly. To describe her as a snake would be too insulting, she looked just like a demon. Ryuuji looked at her apprehensively.

"And, Minorin likes Ryuuji too."

"......Oh......"

"Huh? Hey! Hey! Hold up, that's just your own conjecture isn't it!"

"Shut up you.....it's definitely like that! I know everything. Though a lot of things have happened so it's been rather rocky between them. But no one should go and disturb them. Baka-chi, you shouldn't do anything like that too!"

Looking at Taiga's serious expression, Ami lightly swirled her latte with a coffee spoon as she observed Ryuuji.

"I see! Well, I guess I understand what you're trying to say.....but, why are you in such a rush to tell me that."

"Ryuuji got rejected by Minorin on Christmas Eve!"

Ahhhhhhhhhhh!!!--- Ryuuji's mouth opened wide in a soundless scream,

".....Seriously!?"

"Yes! He got rejected!"

Ami blinked her eyes. On a side note, a couple on the neighbouring chairs were looking over, and even the shop owner, Mr. Sudo had put down his calculator to look at Ryuuji. Got rejected! Who? Is it that person? Is it that demon-faced youth? American? That's so pitiful!..... In an instant, Sudobucks was filled with merciless discussion on the topic, making Ryuuji want to disappear into the ground.

The discussions became louder and louder, drowning Ryuuji in their intensity and fervor. In that instant before

he collapsed, Ryuuji mustered all of his remaining strength to smack the table.

"......To be more accurate, I was rejected before I even confessed my feelings to Kushieda."

Having said that, Ryuuji sprawled onto the table.

How could Taiga. Though it was the truth that he had been rejected by Minori, but why did she have to spread this around. If he could use magic, he would erase the memories of everyone around and walk out pretending that nothing had happened, but unfortunately, this was already in other people's memories, one of them being Kawashima Ami.

"......Oh~So it was like this?"

Hearing Ami's evilly sweet voice, Ryuuji raised his head. She must be thinking of more scary and hurtful things to say. Since it has come to this, what's one or two more wounds to add to the hundreds already on his body?

At that exact moment, Ami's gaze shifted away from Ryuuji's face. She dropped her smile and buried her mouth into her cup of latte, seeming to be mumbling to herself.

".....Looks like someone finally got 'hurt'."

But her gaze wasn't on Ryuuji, but on Taiga. Taiga had also noticed that gaze, and lifted her head in response to it.

"This school trip is Ryuuji's last chance to confess his feelings to Minorin! -- I can't let anyone get in their way, do you understand?"

She suddenly turned to look at Ryuuji,

"It would have been better if we had gone to Okinawa, but there's no point in complaining about that. 'Life's unfair!'. A skiing trip isn't the best setting, but it's your last chance to find out Minorin's true feelings. And by last, I mean we're going to be split into different classes next year. Ryuuji's going to science right?"

".....Yeah, science."

"Minori's an arts student, so the two of you will be in different classes. In other words, you'll be separated from her after this year. Which is why, this school trip is really the last chance! Do you get it?"

Ryuuji felt a spate of breathlessness at being stared at from such close quarters. To be streamed into different classes--though hard to accept, it was the truth. He had already grown accustomed to being in the same class as Kushieda. The spring that he had looked forward too was now going to be over soon. And everything had not been going well. So should he bow out of the competition , or should he push himself at this crucial interchange?

"So, Baka-chi! --Listen up! You're always sticking to Ryuuji, isn't it about time to stop?"

"Huh? So you're trying to say that Ami-chan has been sticking to Takasu-kun all this time?"

"I'm not trying to say, it's just that you have been sticking to this depressed Ryuuji the moment you appeared!"

"Is that right? But, anyway, whatever makes you happy."

To tease Taiga, Ami purposely laughed playfully at her, and then muttered softly,

"--if that's what you really want."

Her eyes were hidden behind the shiny shades. Taiga seemed to not have heard that sentence as she sat there expressionlessly, finishing up the last of her biscuits.

But Ami didn't continue. She slowly finished her coffee, looked at the time on her cellphone, and then placed her Chanel bag on her lap.

"Ah, this is so boring. I'm not interested in your childish love stories. I've had enough, so I'm going back. It's also about time. What're the two of you going to do?"

"You're right, let's go. It's almost six. Ryuuji has to go prepare dinner."

Taiga said. She was right, no matter how much psychological pressure he was under, Ryuuji still had to be back home preparing dinner by seven. Ryuuji stood up and took out some money to pay for his coffee, giving it to the cashier after collecting the rest of the bill from Taiga and Ami. And just as he prepared to walk around the table to leave together with Ami.

"Hey!?"

Suddenly, Ami lifted her head and grabbed onto Ryuuji's collar. That aggressive action seemed to want to force him to sit down again, causing him to shiver involuntarily despite it being a woman's strength.

"......It's too bad you weren't the only one that got 'hurt'."

"......What?! What do you mean by that?!"

Ami's eyes that were hidden on the other side of the sunglasses seem to have seen right through him.

"Anyway, idiots wouldn't have understood that."

Ami pouted, looking as though she was laughing, but instead creating a sense of fear and anger.

"I still loathe you after all!"

"......"

Ami mercilessly kicked Ryuuji away, but lost her footing. Despite that, she didn't fall, but merely corrected her step, and left the shop.

--Too bad you weren't the only one that got 'hurt'

Ryuuji stared at Ami's retreating form, unable to ask any of the burning questions that was in his head. Ami's angry expression was exactly like the one she had on that night.

The starting point of her anger was probably the conversation that they had while preparing for the party. Ami had teased him, saying that he and Minori were playing the part of parents to Taiga, and had also said that they should stop this ridiculous game before someone gets hurt.....But Ami had said after the conversation to forget her words.

Of course it was impossible to just forget her words--and he had been rejected by Minori, and had gotten 'hurt' .

Was the truth really as Ami had said, that him, Taiga and Minori were all living in a fictitious family mentality ?

If he wasn't the only one who had gotten hurt, then who else had been 'hurt'?

".....You're always like this, always saying half of what you mean."

You're always calling me an idiot, so tell me something that even idiots can understand. Ami's figure had already disappeared through the door, but Ryuuji's eyes were still trained on it. Since you're more mature than everyone else, and understand more than everyone else. Then tell me, instead of being angry by yourself, understanding by yourself, leaving by yourself,

Why are you always like this!

"Baka-chi went off?.....What happened? You look like you just died."

Both the cashier and Taiga looked at the cold expression on Ryuuji's face confusedly.

* * *

When Ryuuji and Taiga walked out onto the street, the sky had already darkened. After night had fallen, the frigid cold followed soon after, making even breathing a bit hard.

"You haven't bought the groceries that you need right? You should hurry."

"Look."

"I'll be going to the station. There's a new bento shop before the ticket gates."

Outside of the shopping street was a T-junction that was filled with the smell of exhaust gas.

The people walking on the street were gone, and under the streetlights, Taiga creased her eyebrows, muttering "Brrrr". From this position, the lights from the bridge across the river could be faintly made out. To the left of this T-junction was the station, while a big supermarket was to the right of the T-junction. In other words, he would have to say goodbye to Taiga here and wouldn't have a chance to talk with her until tomorrow at school. Ryuuji hesitated, searching for the words to say , but decided to say what he was supposed to say.

"......The best chance to confirm Minori's feelings that you mentioned yesterday. You meant......the school trip?"

"Yes! Don't tell me you've forgotten it already!?"

"I did forget. What you said about Kawashima always sticking to me.....You even thought of that. I'll say this first, thank you. Even though I think you just said something uncalled for to someone who doesn't care."

Taiga pulled up the collar of her coat, facing away from him.

"It's better to tell Baka-chi about this kind of thing. And I'm also partly responsible for this. If not for my actions that day, it would probably have ended differently."

Taiga pouted as she spoke, looking up at the sky as though looking for some particular stars.

"......On that night, do you know what Minorin said to me?"

She seemed to be talking to herself, making it difficult for Ryuuji to say anything. Taiga turned to him, her expression a cross between sadness and happiness.

"'Nothing happened~' That's what she said.....Just like how Takasu cheered me up when I was depressed, she was so tenderhearted. But she said, nothing happened. Nothing happened nothing happened, she repeated over and over, and then smiled. She is that kind of girl."

".....She probably thought that it wasn't a big deal."

"Id~iot~!"

Under the streetlights, Taiga seemed to have stopped looking up at the skies as she turned to Ryuuji. She used her fingers to press down the hair that was being blown away by the night wind as she shouted,

"The feeling is mutual between you and Minorin. It'll be alright!!! Seriously!!!"

Looking at Taiga's confident demeanor, Ryuuji wanted to ask her some questions,

".....Actually, I've always wanted to ask you. Why do you believe it so strongly? Where did you hear 'Minorin likes Ryuuji' from? Don't say something like 'I can just tell'."

"Would you like to hear it?"

Taiga was surprisingly honest. That smile looked like it belonged to a magician about to reveal the trick behind his magic, full of confidence. Taiga put her hands on her hips, looking confidently at Ryuuji.

"Then, promise me one thing. I'll tell you but only if you promise not to say stupid things like 'Huh?', ' Impossible!', and 'It can't be!'."

"......I won't say anything like that! I swear!"

Ryuuji raised one hand in a solemn vow, waiting for Taiga to reveal the secret behind her magic. Taiga nodded and turned around,

"Then, let me tell you--I believe so because there is a reason in my heart to believe so!"

Just that.

But only that.

Ryuuji was stunned for a moment, but still managed to catch himself before a 'huh?' escaped from his lips.

"To put it simply, I believe in 'you', I believe that you're someone worthy of being loved by Minorin. That you're someone that deserving of her!"

Taiga lowered her head after saying that, and then raised her head once again, giving a joking smile before turning back sharply,

".....So~I'll see you tomorrow!"

Under the dim light cast by the streetlamps, Taiga started to run towards the station. She stopped halfway as if remembering something, and shouted,

"Speaking of which, what was up with you today! Don't you dare run away again like that tomorrow! You better not run away tomorrow!"

Without stopping to see Ryuuji's reaction to her words, Taiga ran off. Her child-like figure vanished into the golden hue of the streetlamps.

Ryuuji stood there silently, pressing lightly on his chest. It was really a display of magic, he said to himself.

The heart that was laced with wounds was now fired up again after being showered in magic. If Taiga said so,

if she believed in him, he felt like he could believe that he was someone worthy of being believed in by her. That, he might actually be a pretty decent guy.

And Ryuuji knew as well. He knew that Taiga's words were worth believing in.

Ryuuji had gotten back his self-confidence once again, thanks to a small act of magic. He slowly walked by himself in the darkened night. But a sudden gust of the southern wind led him to think, that if Ami saw such a naive version of himself, she would probably look at him with the cold gaze that said 'just as I thought, you still don't know anything at all'.....probably.

Chapter 3

"Good---Morning!"

Hearing a voice that seemed to be hiding a certain degree of awkwardness, Minori turned around.

In the freezing winter air, a group of fat sparrows squeezed together in a group, moving from a nearby bush to the ground beside the two of them, their mouths pecking at the asphalt road.

".....Yo! MAN! Good Morning!"

Minori's energetic reply startled the group of sparrows , and they took off.

Though the temperature was already sub-zero in the morning, the overly sunny weather gave an entirely different impression. The slightly strong beams of sunlight shone down onto Minori's fair complexion, and just for a moment, looking at that quiet smile of hers, Ryuuji felt that even the sunlight became softer.

Ryuuji caught himself staring at the girl, and quickly lowered his head in an attempt to hide it, the words that he had wanted to say suddenly disappeared from his

mouth, as he merely stood there open-mouthed. No, I can't run away from this, or else it'll become like what happened yesterday.

"Umm, about, ye,yesterday.....that, I'm sorry. Ah, you see.....I, seemed to have ignored you....."

Minori didn't even hear out Ryuuji's stammering apology before cutting him off.

"It's nothing, Takasu-kun, I didn't mind at all."

How tragic.

Between that slight smile was a row of cute and pearly teeth. That kind of smile, coupled with the colourful square-patterned muffler on her neck gave off the image of a winter-blooming sunflower. The teenage girl used her finger to pull back a lock of her hair, and adjusted the strap of her heavy-looking sports bag.

"I thought that you probably had a stomach ache at that time."

As she spoke, she hopped in front of him.

She probably didn't think that, for she should understand the real reason behind Ryuuji's actions and his feelings about it.

"That's why, it's nothing!"

Even after something like this, Minori was still smiling at him with an infectious smile, causing Ryuuji to smile in kind. It felt like a long-awaited reunion between the two of them, for they were finally less than one metre apart from each other.

".....Well, it was rather painful....."

"Oh oh! What a sensational confession!"

Ryuuji's smile wasn't faked, and neither was it patronizing.

He smiled because he had gotten over that ditch. He got rejected, then got up and continued to go forwards. Though he had stopped for a while due to the rejection, Ryuuji was unable to give up completely. Because he disliked running away.

That's why, the only thing that Ryuuji could do now was to smile, to smile and wait for the new beginning after the storm. For some reason, he suddenly remembered a television show that he had watched. In a traffic accident, children had a higher tendency to avoid heavy injuries than adults. That was because of their comparatively more flexible bodies. Which was to say, in that moment of collision, after the instinctive body reaction of diving to the side, the flexibility of the child's body reduced the impact and damage to the minimum. Therefore, the flexible body acted as a lifesaver.

It was the same reason to keep smiling, to use this mental and emotional flexibility to endure. Ryuuji planned to endure everything gently, for if he faced everything serious, he probably would have collapsed.

Smile, Takasu Ryuuji. Smile, Kushieda Minori. No reason, no inner thoughts and motives, just to show the gentle side of yourself---Whatever expression that he was wearing right now didn't matter. Minori couldn't help but start laughing when she saw his expression, but a smile was still a smile.

Smile, it was better than anything to escape from those depressing emotions. Right, Taiga.....Looking up at the clear, blue skies, Ryuuji couldn't help but think of Taiga's expression, is she still sleeping.....thinking of Taiga placing a donut above her head, Ryuuji started to laugh.

Whereas, the Taiga in reality.....

"Good~Morning! Min~orin!"

Completely ignoring Ryuuji's existence, Taiga waved to Minori from the other side of the road. "Hi~Hi~!" Minori was waving both of her heads, while Taiga was flailing all four of her limbs, 'Hi~Hi~Hi~!. The white-collar workers standing behind Taiga all looked awkwardly at Taiga's exaggerated actions.

Doesn't she feel embarrassed, Ryuuji sighed. And, why did even Minori follow her lead and do the 'Hi~Hi~Hi~Hi~!' thing?

"Hi~Hi,Hi~! Good~Good Morning~~Good Morning, Good~Morn~ing~Good Morning Morning~~Good Morning~!"

DJ Minori, who was swinging her bag around wildly, placed one hand on a set of headphones that only she could see, while turning an invisible disc in time with the beat, shouting 'Hi~Hi~Good Morning~Good~!' to an invisible audience.....giving off the feeling that even her voice was on fire.

"What're you doing, Minorin! That's so weird!"

Taiga started to laugh uncontrollably, while the white-collar workers standing behind her started to look at Minori strangely as well. And then, Ryuuji, who was standing beside the crazy Minori, looked to the white-collar workers with a demonic gaze. The gaze that seemed to say 'I'll kill you if you dare to look at my Kushieda like that', not, Ryuuji was merely captivated by the DJ Minori, but.....

"Stop it, Kushieda.....the two of you really has no sense of embarrassment. I think I'll go first."

"Why~Ah, wouldn't it be better to go off together."

"I don't think that's such a good idea. I can't keep up with your pace."

With yesterday's incident already resolved, Ryuuji decided to hightail it out of there.

"Ah! Minorin! Ryuuji's running away, grab him!"

Taiga suddenly shot off an order. What's she trying to do, Ryuuji thought.

"Huh!? Grab him?"

Minori asked. Just as Taiga turned to make eye contact with Minori, Ryuuji's body instinctively dodged to the side. Instinctively, Minori also grabbed the arm of Ryuuji , who was trying to run away. The cold hands came into contact with each other as Minori's fingers grabbed onto Ryuuji's hand.

"---"

That feeling of contact seemed to last for less than a second.

Of course, Ryuuji jumped at the contact, but not to the extent of crying out. That feeling was like being struck by lightning, a sudden burst of energy towards one's tailbone. But surprisingly, Minori was the one who broke contact first.

Ah! Anyway, that feeling was indescribable. He was probably just lucky.

In that moment, Minori's fingers lost power and let go as though repelled by an electric field. She quickly withdrew her hand as though burnt by that contact, covering it with her other hand. The teenage girl was blushing furiously, as she wanted to say something to Ryuuji but stopped, coldly staring at him with an angry expression on her face, and then.....

"Prey! See if you can take this!"

Minori roared before sticking out her hand once more.

"Argh-----! Gah-----! Kah-----!"

.....Though the screams were exaggerated, but it was just Minori grabbing on to the collar of Ryuuji's school blazer. But right now, both of them felt extremely shy. If Ryuuji lifted his arm, he would have been able to shake off Minori's hand easily, but he meekly accepted defeat.... ..In actual fact, he was afraid to move.

At that exact moment, the traffic light turned green. Taiga looked carefully to both sides of the road, and then

ran over. She looked at Ryuuji's expression at being grabbed at the collar by Minori, and then looked at Minori, and laughed.

"The person who got caught will be in charge of carrying the luggage!"

"Huh?"

Taiga threw her bag at Ryuuji, who instinctively caught it. Taiga then pointed at Ryuuji, hopping lightly in front of him. The teenage girl's body seemed to be weightless as she opened her arms and floated past the two of them.

"He fell for it! I'm going off first!"

She continued running off, her skirt waving.

"Going off first.....Hey, Taiga! That's not funny!..... What am I supposed to do with this!? Am I really supposed to lug this all the way to school!"

Ryuuji still held Taiga's bag in his hands, but luckily the bag wasn't too heavy. But right now, Ryuuji was just a weakling whom Taiga was bullying---even if it was the means to let him go to school with Minori together, but

she hadn't really needed to do such a complex action, even if he was hoping for something like this, couldn't she have thought of something more direct?

Ryuuji stood there dazedly as he stared at Taiga's rapidly disappearing figure.

".....It's all Kushieda's fault for grabbing me....."

Ryuuji glanced at Minori, who didn't seem to react to his statement.

"Damn Taiga.....Damn Taiga.....Damn Taiga....."

She repeated under her breath over and over again, looking like a wet puppy shaking itself to get the water off its fur. Suddenly, she turned around and thrust out her chest like a transforming hero, '.....No, it's alright even in this kind of situation!', and then.

"Come, give me one of the straps."

".....Huh? One?"

"That's right."

She took one strap from Taiga's bag that Ryuuji was holding. The bag swung between the two of them as they walked, looking like two little children carrying a large grocery bag to go shopping,

"Taiga's really gone too far. I'll should really scold her when we get to school."

But right now, Ryuuji was so close to Minori that he could smell the fragrance of her hair.....he felt his entire body stiffening.

"Right!"

".....Yes!"

If only Taiga was here for this kind of situation.

The two of them walked for a while. Minori said 'wait up' --- and took out a pair of gloves from her pocket to wear on her hands before taking the strap of Taiga's bag to continue walking.

It was a sudden opportunity, but it looks like I don't have any chance to run away. Though I really want to run away from this awkward atmosphere. It won't do to

continue like this, it should be better to talk about something. Ah, there's something. Ryuuji sifted through his brain to look for potential conversation topics as he walked.

"Hmm! Kushieda, did you specially style your hair like that?"

"No, Nope. Ah.....I just cut it a little."

He finally found a viable topic of conversation.

"Oh god, actually if the hairdresser hadn't said ' Kushieda-san's hair is too messy, you shouldn't have such long hair if you want to play baseball', I wouldn't have cut it. And my hair's really hard, so if I don't take care of it, the messy hair would make my head seem abnormally large. I was slightly spooked after hearing his advice."

Kushieda said wistfully as she breathed lightly.

"Well, it would probably be a hindrance if you were to play baseball, but that's unavoidable I guess. However, you do look.....how do I put it, manly! You look very imposing. No, I don't mean it in a bad way!!"

".....,but, even short hair looks good on you."

Minori looked at Ryuuji and smiled as if agreeing with his assessment.

As they spoke, Minori touched her short fringe with her gloved hand.

"Actually, when I was still in grade school, I was just like Margareta. I stayed in the same room as my younger brother, and even cut hair together with him. We went to the same hairdresser that only cut hair for men. They always called me 'Mr. Lady'."

"Mr. Lady.....that's rather mean.....Your brother? Hmm, I remember he was in a high school baseball team ?"

"Yup, their next opponent is a school that routinely wins at Koushien, and he might even become a Koushien pitcher next year! A pitcher! That fellow!"

"I didn't know that you're brother was so good!"

"Tsk! He's actually the subject of my jealousy! Ah~~ And to think that I was better than him when both of us were in the Dairenpo! He's kicked his elder sister off her seat as the little Mexican boss!"

"What are you talking about, and, little Mexico? Are you talking about the team?"

"Heh heh~Takasu-kun's words are really impactful, my hair's been zapped by it!"

As she spoke, Minori caressed her hair while making buzzing noises as though her hair was standing on its ends. Ryuuji looked at her and observed that the back of her pearly neck was exposed despite the best efforts of her mufflers. To be honest, there's nothing bad about having short hair, Ryuuji couldn't help but think.

For some reason, Ryuuji could suddenly smile naturally without forcing himself. Right now, Minori was beside him, carrying a bag with him, walking slowly to school with him. It was like his shattered emotions had been tightly meshed together like Onigiri, made into its original shape of a heart to give off the light that it was made to give off. To get him to pull himself together, and to not run away.

Ryuuji wished that everything could just continue like this. As though everything never happened, and that everything could start again from the beginning.

Right, there's still a chance during the school trip, he could try to face her alone again.

And then, maybe it'll be just like what Taiga had said, that Minori would give him a different answer.

This is what Ryuuji believed. At this time, he had started to think that this was positive, this was a step forward, this was correct, in other words, that this was a "good thing".

"Alright, let's go look for Taiga! Just where did she run off to!?"

"She's not here. Toilet? Or the Cupboard?"

"I've combed those places already, and even unearthed a hamburger!"

Minori started her hunt for Taiga the moment they reached the classroom. Though he was still half-awake, but Ryuuji quickly woke himself up to search for Taiga together with her.

Ami, who had come to school early, met Ryuuji's gaze as he searched for Taiga. But that was because she was surrounded by Maya, Nanako and the other girls, who were excitedly talking about something when she saw Ryuuji and Minori appearing in class together and looked over in surprise. But before Ryuuji could decipher her expression, Minori also discovered Ami's existence.

"Oh! Ami-senpai! Happy new year! Right, have you seen that fellow Taiga?"

"Ah~Good morning, Minori~No, I don't think I've seen Tiger today.....And by the way, who's that....."

Right, Takasu-kun. She seemed to be saying.

What would happen if he just stomped over and slapped her?---Though Ryuuji didn't do it, but he really wanted to. What was she trying to say? But Ami stopped after that sentence,

".....What, who're you talking about?....."

Though it was an ambiguous and barbed statement, Minori still seriously considered the meaning behind it. And Ryuuji could only stand there. Fantasies were still fantasies after all, so he merely stood there.

"I won't know~~Who's that~~?"

A slight tremor surged up between Ami and Minori. Just at that moment, Taiga walked into the classroom. ' Ah! I've found Taiga!'.....That slight tremor disappeared into the bustling atmosphere of the classroom.

* * *

The afternoon of the same day, homeroom period.

Class teacher, the single woman (30 years old) pushed the job of conducting homeroom to Kitamura while she hugged a large stack of magazines.....If one looked closely, one would see that the magazines were all freebies given out at bus stops regarding real estate, as the single woman sank into her own world. Most of the students in class were also sleepy due to the fact that they just finished lunch,

"Alright, let's begin, open your eyes~"

Kitamura started speaking from the podium, though his aura was next to non-existent.

"You've all waited long for this today~We're going to decide the groups for the school trip now~"

Waited long? No one remembered saying something like that. Kitamura was probably the only one who was looking forward to it, but even then, no one dared to talk back.

"Each group will consist of four guys and four girls~"

As he spoke, Kitamura started scribbling on the blackboard, writing down the crooked numbers of 4,4,4.

The atmosphere in the classroom right now was extremely relaxed, with the exception of Ryuuji, who was sitting at his seat with a serious expression on his face. Like a samurai, or a gun-toting delinquent, anyway, the point was that he was the only one who seemed to be keen on deciding the groups for the school trip.

To Ryuuji, the school trip was an extremely important opportunity. It was the only chance to reestablish his relationship with Minori. But even then, his classmates

all wore irritated expressions and were whispering among themselves, hoping that the school trip would be canceled. Not many people would want to go up the mountain on a ski trip during the winter. If he had known that things were going to turn out like this, Ryuuji would never had set such a stupid curse.

"Right, lets begin~Just give me a list of your group members by the time limit!"

Upon the order from the unenthusiastic Kitamura, everyone stood up to discuss their grouping. 'I guess we don't have a choice' 'Ah, let's start!', in an instant, the classroom was filled with lively discussion.

"Well, Takasu-kun'll obviously be in my group! The only one left is that idiot!"

Noto speedily walked towards Ryuuji's seat while pointing at Haruta, who was grinding his teeth and rolling his eyes at the injustice of not being able to go to Okinawa.

"Great Deity, why don't you join us too!"

Standing on the podium as though he was campaigning for an election, Kitamura elegantly pointed

a finger towards them, saying something along the lines of 'I'm in'.

"That's it, we have four people! The guy's side is set!"

Looking at his enthusiastic expression, Ryuuji felt that maybe all was not lost after all. Though the trip to clear blue skies and pearly beaches had been canceled, it should still be an enjoyable trip as it was with friends. But if he wanted enjoy the trip to the fullest, Ryuuji decided that he should express some form of enthusiasm so as to infect his surrounding classmates with the same feeling.

Lifting his chin with his hand, Ryuuji let out a killing aura.....no, or rather, Ryuuji enthusiastically opened his eyes. Though his intention was clear, but his expression looked like he was going on a killing spree.

"Oh! All that's left is the girl's group!"

But for the girl's group, it was useless to attack them with perverted expressions. Ryuuji's only wish was to be in the same group as Minori. But Noto, who was not involved in anyway to his wish, repeatedly poked Ryuuji's arm while making extremely uncute 'heh heh heh' sounds.

"We have to be in the same group as Tiger! Kitamura and Tiger! They have to be in the same group! You don't mind do you~"

"......Why are you doing such things again....."

"Don't you agree that such a small-scale and simple school trip needs to be nourished by a bit of love~"

Ryuuji inhaled deeply. The cloud of carbon dioxide that had gathered in the air disappeared immediately.

Looks like Noto had other motives for wanting to liven up the atmosphere. It was rare that even someone as slow as Noto would notice. Even Noto was scheming to get Kitamura and Taiga together.

Of course, Ryuuji also wished that Taiga could be in the same group as Kitamura, since she'll surely be extremely happy. But, why.....why didn't I say it. Within such a noisy environment, he didn't need to express his interest in that pairing. And if there was a need for it, he would surely help Taiga. It was impossible for Noto to understand Taiga's complex and strange personality.

Looking at Noto's happy expression, Ryuuji wanted to say something along the lines of 'Don't get so excited about it!!' 'You're just meddling in other people's affairs~' , but chose to keep silent.

Somewhere away from them, Minori and Taiga were stuck together, chatting. 'The school trip's so boring. But I'm happy to be with you~' 'Haha~~So Minorin feels that way too~!'.....The two of them were chatting happily. Which was to say that if Taiga were to be in his group, then Minori would automatically be in his group. Why hadn't he noticed such an obvious thing earlier. He only had to go along with Noto's plan to get what he wanted.

".....Don't get too excited, you meddling oba-san!"

"Huh? But wouldn't it be really interesting? Tiger and Kitamura seem to get along well! And its about time Kitamura forgot about Aniki, so this is probably the best time for Tiger to make her move~"

"Don't interfere in other people's private lives!"

What he wanted to say was, those two are totally different things.

"Takasu's really.....forget it. And speaking of that, is there only Tiger and Kushieda? Are they going to be in the same group as Ami-chan? If that's the case, then our group'll have the strongest formation!"

Ever since her strange outburst, Ami had completely ignored Ryuuji's existence. Ami-chan, who hated him for the simple reason that he was an idiot---Ryuuji casually looked around the classroom, quickly finding her in the middle of the bishoujo three woman team. For some reason, Maya was excitedly saying 'It'll be really really good, let's invite him~', to which Ami reluctantly replied 'Are you serious?', while Nanako looked at the two of them interestedly. The three of them were completely surrounded by other guys, who looked as though they were silently chanting 'please be in our group!'.

No, no, Ryuuji shook his head to Noto.

"That's impossible! Kawashima and Taiga are mortal enemies, and she has already grouped herself with Kihara and Kashii, so there's only one place left in their group."

And I'm being hated by Kawashima.....It was better not to say that part.

"Ah! Kitamura and Tiger, Ami-chan and I, it would have been the perfect plan."

"Your plan's really bold and shameless."

"That's nothing, I'm merely flying freely with the aid of my limitless imagination! That's right, Kushieda and Tiger, are you interested to be in our group?"

Minori and Taiga stared unblinkingly at Noto, who was beckoning them to go over, as they slowly walked over.

"What to do, Taiga~~Looks like this man wants to become our nakama~!"

"Give him an oba-san chop! Minorin!"

Taiga nonchalantly looked at Ryuuji before turning her gaze back to Minori. I want to be in the same group as Minori too, Ryuuji wanted to turn his head to mouth, something that was impossible. He merely pointed towards the podium, as if he was asking 'don't you want to be in the same group as Kitamura?'

"Hey~Hey~Maruo, join our group~~"

Oh no~Ryuuji merely took his eyes off Kitamura for a moment!

He was too careless! But it was too late, as Maya had already stuck herself onto Kitamura. And Kitamura, not knowing that he was to be paired up with Taiga's group, was happily agreeing with her while saying things like 'I don't mind being in Maya's group either'. Things were not going to plan.

"Ah!! Wait!!!!!!!! Great Deity!"

Noto also felt that things were going the wrong way, as he sprinted onto the podium to separate Maya and Kitamura. 'Alright~That's a big no no! Off you go now! I'm sorry, Kihara, but Great Deity Kitamura's in our group, who's going to be together with Taiga's group~!"

"Ah? Seriously?"

As if to say, you're not needed over here---Maya's face showed that line of words. In her eyes probably only Kitamura was needed for the school trip.

Noto forcibly grabbed Kitamura shoulders, 'let's go put our names onto the list.', planning to drag him over as soon as possible. At that exact moment,

Maya shouted for him to stop as she reached out towards Kitamura.

".....group members are, Maruo, Noto, Takasu and Haruta right?"

Together with Ami, Nanako had also walked over. Under the pressure of the seemingly generous tone, Noto couldn't help but stop walking.

"Shouldn't you at least consult the opinions of your other group members. Hey~Haruta-kun~Wake up~~ Wake~Up!!!"

Nanako shouted into the ear of Haruta, who had already lost consciousness. Like a zombie, or like he had just been stepped on by an elephant, Haruta, slowly opened his eyes and took back his consciousness.

"Hey~Haruta-kun.....Us, and them? Which side do you like more.....?"

".....Ah....."

Haruta opened his eyes. He looked at Nanako and Ami, then at Maya. And then he turned towards the

direction in which Nanako was pointing at and saw Taiga and Minori. And then.....

".....Yes.....this side....."

As though he was being pulled to Nanako's side, Haruta stumbled towards here.

"Thank you~Please continue sleeping~If you can..... continue sleeping forever....."

Nanako twirled her finger as Haruta rolled his eyeballs in accordance to the twirling of her finger before falling to the ground, unmoving. Ami nodded her head while saying 'Nanako's really good!', with Maya clapping in agreement.

"You're just like a hypnotist!"

"Haruta's brain's like that of a dragonfly.....?"

My friend has the brain of a dragonfly? Dragonfly? Noto wailed despairingly, while Ryuuji helped the pitiful Haruta to his feet.

As though challenging him, Maya looked at Noto from behind Kitamura, while Noto immediately returned the

favour. Taiga and Minori was already unable to follow the pace of this exchange and looked at each other exasperatingly, while Kitamura subconsciously began to rub the bridge of his nose upon realizing that this situation was largely the result of his answer.

Ryuuji suddenly thought of something. If it was normal for Maya to want to be in the same group as ' Maruo', then what about Ami? That would place her in the same group as him. As he peeked at her, Ryuuji thought, does she really want to skip this once-in-a-lifetime school trip?

Ami either didn't notice or pretended not to notice Ryuuji's gaze, as she determinedly looked in Maya's direction.

"Ah? Wait, isn't this just nice!"

On the other side, the popular Kitamura suddenly realized an important truth,

"Kihara has three people on her side while Kushieda and Taiga's two people. There are sixteen guys and seventeen girls in this class, which means that one group will have four guys and five girls, which solved this problem."

'Eh!?', Maya was the one who screamed. Though she got her wish of being in the same group as Kitamura, her almond-shaped eyes looked at Taiga suspiciously. To Maya, in Aniki's absence, the final boss of the fight for Kitamura was Aisaka Taiga.

Taiga, who was finally able to be in the same group as Kitamura, was similarly unable to give a natural smile.

"Ah~~? I'm in your group!? That's really bad! Ah, why don't you just give Minori to us, you can roam around by yourself like the lonely tiger you are!"

"I should be the one saying that, Baka-chi, enjoy the lonely process of finding a partner! Ah, there's someone like you over there."

"Why is the single woman (30 years old) like me?"

As Taiga and Ami blasted each other, no one noticed the strange look in Maya's eyes as she walked towards Ryuuji.

".....Looks like it'll be rather tiring, let's work hard together! And, that fellow, Noto.....! I hate him!"

She opened her eyes to their widest capacity as though looking for the agreement of the other party.

"......Umm, you've misunderstood, since last year, I've never, towards Taiga....."

He had wanted to explain everything to Maya, but she wasn't listening as she shouted 'Maruo! Lets fill in the group list!' with unnatural enthusiasm, running towards Kitamura.

Looking at her receding figure, Ryuuji couldn't help but sigh,

"The two of you are fighting again, be nice, Ami."

"Ah, of course, I would love to have Minori join us, just that you're. the. extra. one!"

"Baka-chi, your nakama's drawing red circles on matchmaking magazines, you should go and discuss your future with her."

"Which is why I've been saying, why is that single woman (30 years old) my nakama!?"

As usual, Taiga and Ami continued to quarrel while Ryuuji observed every one of Minori's expressions. What's that, it looks like nothing has changed, including Ami's relationship with Minori, Ryuuji couldn't help but sigh as he thought.

* * *

Whispering.....

"......?"

Ryuuji was dreaming of girls whispering and laughing softly among themselves.

Amidst the soft whispering, Ryuuji opened the eyes that were heavily wrapped up by a towel and lifted his head slowly, looking at the clock just in time for a flash of lightning to show him the time.

It was nine in the morning. But today was a Sunday, so he should be able to sleep in, since it wasn't yet time for his only activity of the day.

He closed his towel-covered eyes once again.

".....Looks like he didn't notice anything."

"Ah, he still wants to sleep."

---Ah?

The pair of eyes opened so quickly that the eyeballs threatened to burst out of their sockets, it wasn't an awakening of some long-forgotten memory, some people were having a conversation next to him.

From the 15 cm gap between the curtains from which the early morning sunlight streamed in, the window to Taiga's apartment could be seen, and there were two people standing at the window---

".....Oh!!"

"Ah, he woke up."

"Not good, we've been compromised!"

Ryuuji got up and pulled apart the curtains to confirm what his eyes had seen a moment before: He immediately closed the curtains after looking out of his window.

Just now, just now, just now, just now.....Oh! Ryuuji finally woke up and realized that he wasn't in a dream.

"Ryuuji! You're not allowed to hide from reality! Wake up!"

"It's alright, Taiga, he's looks so sleepy that its pitiful."

Taiga and Minori were standing on the balcony, peeking into someone else's bedroom---and they were wearing furry pajamas, compounded by the bad timing---

".....Ah.....I heard Taiga-chan's voice....."

Yasuko, who should have been dead asleep at this time, stumbled into her son's room, looking and acting like a zombie. Ryuuji's 'Wait, don't come in' was already too late, as his mother stepped onto his bed and pulled apart the curtains that had just been pulled shut.

"Ah~~, it's Taiga-chan~~And Taiga-chan's friend, Good morning~~"

Yasuko said as she waved to the two peeping-toms.

"Ya-chan, good morning! Minori, this is Ryuuji's mother."

"Good morning! Ohai! Ohai! I'm Kushieda! Good morning Takasu's mother! Ohai! Ohai! Bomb a head! Bomb a head!"

"Minori, you're going to burst the blood vessels in my brain with your singing."

To tell the truth, there was no other word to describe Yasuko's hairstyle other than 'caveman' at the moment, which looked like the probable result of sleeping without washing off the hair gel on one's hair, even if she redeemed herself slightly by having taken off her makeup before sleeping, 'Good morning~~' Yasuko replied while swaying dangerously.

"Ah! Ryu-chan, it's so cold!"

"Isn't it all because you opened the windows! Go wear something!.....Argh---Ah!!"

Under the slanted bra cups that could no longer prevent their contents from spilling out was a piece of flowery underwear, which was how Yasuko appeared on her adolescent son's bed, smiling nonchalantly. Even Ryuuji, who was already used to seeing his mother like this, got a shock, not good! We look like a perverted mother-son pair! Ryuuji hurriedly closed the curtains once again.

"Ah, why don't the two of you come over for breakfast, Ryuuji's cooking~~"

Pushing her son aside, the skimpily-dressed Yasuko pulled open the curtains yet again, earning a shriek from Minori in reply. Ryuuji could only feel embarrassed from the bottom of his heart.

"Sorry, Ya-chan, but we've just finished preparing breakfast."

"Oh~~Ya-chan's so lonely~~"

Taiga laughed, while Minori hid her eyes with her hands.

"The meeting time's soon, we better start eating, Minorin."

"Yes! See you later, Takasu-kun!"

---Everyone was going to meet at Taiga's house at noon today to discuss their class's school trip plan, something that every class had to do. Taiga surprisingly offered her house to be used as a meeting point as they were unable to go to a certain family restaurant due to the need for a computer. Which explained why Minori was at Taiga's house.

Ryuuji got up and nonchalantly blocked Yasuko's body with his own while shielding his own furry pajamas with the curtain, and said to Taiga,

".....You should ask Kushieda to help you clean up your room, it should be extremely dirty, seeing as it hasn't been cleaned in a long time, Achoo!"

It was probably the manifestation of Ryuuji's resentment, for his request to help Taiga clean up her apartment had been rejected by her numerous times.

But.....

"You're wrong, it's not like that, my apartment's so clean, its probably cleaner than your place, right, Minorin ."

Mm, mm, Minori nodded in agreement.

".....That's impossible, but no one has cleaned the place in ages....."

"Of course its possible, I hired Duskin's cleaners, who spent three whole hours cleaning the place....."

"Wh.....at!?"

Opposite the grinning Taiga, Ryuuji almost fainted, was she talking about the Duskin cleaning company that provided a complete cleaning service for thirty thousand yen? Those are professionals right, so they'd also cleaned

the places that Ryuuji had always been worried about, places like the spot below the washing machine, the air-conditioner exhaust?

"Professionals really do the job differently! Ryuuji, you can come and take a look later. Minorin and I are going to the clothes shop beside the station at about ten after eating breakfast, which is to say, it's girl's only, so you better not follow us."

"Ah, Taiga, the buzzer just sounded, looks like the bread's ready!"

"Really!? I gotta eat the bread while it's still hot, so see you later, Ryuuji!"

The two of them walked away from the window, while Yasuko had already crashed onto Ryuuji's bed sideways, sleeping soundly.

The hand which Ryuuji put on the windowsill was shaking slightly.

Duskin, professional cleaners? He looked at the Takasu-stick that was placed beside the window, the professional probably have extremely powerful cleaning tools right? They would have used the power of

electricity and machines to clean Taiga's house from top to bottom, and probably also gave Ryuuji's 'special spots' a complete makeover.

Stupid professional cleaners,.....professional cleaners! Not wanting to admit defeat, Ryuuji started to wipe the windowsill with the sleeve of his pajamas.

It's been dirtied by Yasuko's fingerprints!

Due to her son's constant movement on the bed, Yasuko slowly slid off the bed.

'That's really good' --- Everyone sitting around the glass coffee table couldn't help but exclaim.

"I'll go get the computer and printer from my bedroom . Minorin, could you help me get a cord and the power supply."

"Ok!"

Immediately after Taiga and Minori walked out of the living room,

"Hey hey! Hey hey! This apartment's really great, everything's so expensive!"

"This is a rent-out apartment cluster, so obviously the decor would be extremely beautiful.....To be living by herself in such a classy place, Taiga's probably some kind of rich kid isn't she? I want to stay in such a nice apartment too"

"Me too me too."

Coincidentally, Maya, who was wearing a mini-skirt, a jacket and long socks, looked extremely compatible with Nanako, who wore a jacket, long stockings, and a one-piece dress. The two of them shouted 'kya!' in surprise when they saw each other. Ryuuji thought about his own excitement when he first saw Taiga's place as he passed cushions to everyone sitting around the coffee table.

Ah! This apartment's really high class.....On the morning which he first went into Taiga's apartment, Ryuuji looked around and was stunned: All sorts of

rubbish were piled up in the kitchen, giving out an extremely disgusting odour which made him feel like puking. 'That's really bad, I have to clean this up' --- That would be the oft-mentioned fork in one's fate, for if he had ran out because of the odour, what would things be like?

"Seriously, this is just like the apartments that appear in magazines.....I say, Takasu, could you not wipe everything that we've touched?"

"Oh, sorry, I just subconsciously....."

To subconsciously wipe the surface of the table that the girls had touched, not even professional oba-san cleaners could pay that much attention to details.

"Wow, the television's so big!"

"The lighting is also really luxurious!"

Wowing at the television, wowing at the lights, Kitamura and Noto were really enjoying themselves, as Kitamura said to Ryuuji,

"Though I've already heard rumours, but Taiga's house is really beside yours isn't it."

"Huh? So Takasu's place is also in this complex? That's awesome!"

In response to Maya's surprise, Ryuuji could only shake his head vigourously.

"My house is the rented apartment block beside this complex, and our windows just happen to face each other, which is why I know Taiga so well.....not really well, since we see each other in class as well."

"Enemies are bound to meet on a narrow road eh?"

In response to Noto's assessment, Ryuuji could only nod in agreement as everyone else, including Ami, gave an understanding look. Ami, who normally wouldn't join such a tedious and boring activity as making a school trip plan, was dragged here by Taiga's threat 'If you don't want to do it, then you can come and watch DVDs at my house'. She now sat cross-legged beside Maya, wearing a v-necked sweater that showed off her snowy-white complexion. The DVD in question was probably that legendary '150 imitations in a row' recording which starred Kawashima Ami, produced and directed by Aisaka Taiga.

'Ah, this is awesome!? Anyone would look cute in this princess-like dress"

Haruta, who had mysteriously disappeared for a while , suddenly appeared, having snuck into Taiga's cupboard and pulled that one-piece dress of hers which probably cost around a hundred thousand yen over himself, while also putting on a lace mini skirt whose price was probably around the same range.

Just as everyone was thinking 'where did this moron come from', a squirrel-like figure flew past them and took the clothes of the 'moron', slapping him twice in the process,

"Bish bish!"

And then smashed the corner of the laptop into his head.

"Bio-contamination! Everyone, burn this set of clothes!"

"Hey, that's such a waste! It's only been worn by Haruta, and you, don't hit him with the machine, what if it breaks!?"

"Relax, this is a laptop that can withstand a fall of two metres."

"Takasu.....what about me.....doesn't anyone think about whether I'll be broken....."

'Shut up, moron!' Taiga shouted once again, giving him two more slaps to the face.

Everyone else also said things like 'it's your fault' 'you brought it on yourself' 'just die', while Minori, who was hugging the printer, helped Haruta to balance.

"Let's put Haruta aside and start on the plan! Salute!"

To Kitamura who specialised in such things, the response from the others was swift and immediate.

"Excluding the cover page, there are six pages of B5 paper, four of which are background information..... which is to say, we should do the 'instructions' part first, and then just fill in the additional information later, then we'll do the reflections, and then print it out and give it to the teachers. For reference, I've brought last year's plan ."

"Oh, good job, Great Deity! Now we'll be able to just copy the entire thing."

"Ah? Of course we can't do that, you moron. How can we copy the plan for Okinawa? What are you thinking, Noto!"

"That's right!" Maya gave Noto a cold look."

And then, as everyone flipped open the booklet, '..... Ah.....' and let out a hollow sigh simultaneously.

The memories of their seniors' school trip to Okinawa seemed so glamourous.

Discounting the background information part, the reflections section was incredible, as there were dozens of pictures, all showing off the impossibly blue skies and pearly beaches of Okinawa. Everyone was wearing T-shirts, caps, with towels around their necks, having fun under the cheery sun. Even the famous television scene of bringing a cow over the water was recorded in picture form. Their seniors really had fun in Okinawa.

".....hmm?"

Noto suddenly made a weird noise.

And closed the booklet suddenly. Everyone raised their heads to look at him, but Noto could only manage a stuttering explanation 'Ah.....it's nothing.....'. How suspicious!"

"No, it's really nothing, you see, there's no point looking at this if we can't use it as a reference. Let's start googling the relevant information.....I seem to remember a website....."

"Ah, wait, Ami!"

'Let Ami-chan have a look!', Ami grabbed the booklet from Noto across the coffee table and smiled as she flipped to the page that they were looking at, which should have contained something interesting other than boring expositions regarding the activities of their seniors.

".....Ah!.....Haha!.....This, haha!"

"What's that? Something to do with me?"

Ami gave Kitamura a cute puppy-like look, while Noto whispered 'wait, wait, don't do this.' to Ami, which Ami completely ignored while mumbling loudly,

'This is really something that Yuusaku shouldn't look at alone.'

"What? Let me see it."

"Well, I don't have a choice do I, since you really want to see it.....but don't blame me when the tears start to flow....."

"You just want to pique my curiosity don't you, what's wrong with that picture of a cow?.....Oh!!"

In an instant, Kitamura froze, what's wrong? Everyone moved over to look and found out the reason behind Kitamura's response.

That was a picture of a group taking a cow over the water, where for some reason, a long-haired girl was the only one on the luggage rack, while the other members of the group were in the water together with the cow.

That girl was laughing while giving orders from her loftly position, a laughter which seemed to resound in their ears, ahahahahaha.....a boyish laughter.

The girl on the luggage rack was the Aniki which everyone trusted, Kano Sumire.

"Whoa, looks like its still shocking for Yuusaku to see the girl that had dumped him so publicly, even on film! So pitiful, are you alright?"

"No.....Who's pitiful"

"That's good to hear! Speaking of which, Kano-senpai contacted some of her friends here recently, she seems to have gotten a boyfriend in America."

"......I heard from her younger sister that the president got into MIT without much trouble."

"Heh~~Grade-hopping female university student! Ah, that's awesome! But MIT? Isn't that the American-equivalent of Tokyo University? Can Yuusaku get into that school? Ami-chan doesn't know about that."

"......Mm.....where's the power supply?"

Looks like he was completely floored by the vicious attack of his childhood friend, as Kitamura turned his back on everyone to fumble with Taiga's computer cable.

"Transformer, is it this one? Looks like it is, socket, where's the socket....."

Noto felt guilty for starting the whole fiasco and walked over to the wall to help. Maya and Nanako looked at eacher other quietly, while Minori exposed her front teeth for some unknown reason, looking at Kitamura out of the corner of her eyes. And Taiga,

"Bakabakabakabakabakabakabaka, Baka-chi!"

She scolded as she hit Ami's wrist.

"Huh? But isn't it bad to get depressed over something like this, I'm just training him, you see, training him to be stronger emotionally."

As if she didn't notice Kitamura's expression at all, Ami continued to elaborate, 'I'm giving him pressure!'. At this time, Haruta finally regained consciousness, 'This is?.....My room.....?' --- Just like his usual self.

Ryuuji, on the other hand, encouraged his best friend mentally, saying that 'I understand your feelings exactly', though Kitamura didn't know that Ryuuji had also gone through the pain of having salt rubbed into the wound caused by rejection,

".....I'll, go make some tea! Everyone just relax! Alright !?"

Ryuuji said as he got up.

This is a sponge cake I brought from home, it's hard work, so let the wandering waitress Kushieda help you!"

"Oh, thank you, could you help me get three tea cups."

In the large and expensive kitchen, Ryuuji had to work hard to suppress the ripple of emotion welling up within him in response to his reinforcements.

After putting the cake aside, Minori started to fumble around the cupboards while saying 'start work start work'.

"Mm, looks like we're out of tea cups, would the normal cups be alright?"

"Of course."

"Then catch, this cup's really cute, and it looks like it can hold a lot of tea, I'll use this."

Minori balanced three cups on one hand, placing all of them in front of Ryuuji before hooking one of them with her finger, the yellow cup which had a whale drawn on it seemed to have been exchanged at the convenience store by Taiga using her mountain of receipts from that store. Minori smiled at Ryuuji after making those movements.

"What about the sponge cake? It's too troublesome to make another plate, so let's just use this box?"

"That.....that's alright with me."

"Right~~"

Minori didn't notice Ryuuji, whose legs had turned to jelly, as the two of them working as though they were a married couple, their elbows almost touching as she went about opening the box that contained the sponge cake.

"Sponge sponge sponge cake cake cake, sponge cake, sponge cake, sponge cake sponge cake~~"

As though chanting Buddhist scriptures, Minori cheerily took out a specially packaged sponge cake and placed it on the marble table.

"Hey, weren't you planning to bring it over in the box?
"

"......Hmm!? Oh, right!"

Were her hands moving of their own accord? Looking at Minori hurriedly stuffing the sponge cake back into the box, Ryuuji couldn't help but smile.

Putting tea leaves into the cups, Ryuuji mustered all of his mental prowess to stay calm, Minori's naturally relaxed posture, and the beauty that was accentuated by the casual wool jacket and jeans, 'No, what am I thinking' , those soft lips, the side of her face, her lips, her chin......

"......Hey, Golgo....."

"......I'm not Golgo....."

"......Alright then I'm Golgo,.....Don't stand behind me..
...."

"......I'm not standing behind you....."

She was always so honestly beautiful, the charming..... Minori suddenly started to crack jokes at Ryuuji, causing him to raise both of his hands. Had she noticed how he

was looking at her? Ryuuji peeked sideways as his heart rate increased exponentially.

"That's good.....but I've already broken the box when I opened it, so we still need a plate to hold it, I saw one here just now."

Minori ended the joke with a smile, running to the cupboard on the other side of the kitchen, speedily turning up a silver plate,

"It's really heavy, and probably some extremely high class object, would it be alright to use this, Taiga? Taiga!"

Taiga quickly ran into the kitchen, her one-piece dress billowing out behind her.

"What? What happened?"

"Could we use this silver plate? I need something to put the sponge cake on."

"Of course you can, I thought you called me for something other than this."

"Ah, its not that, because this thing looks extremely expensive, so I just wanted to confirm."

Minori smiled at Taiga and Ryuuji as she placed the sponge cake onto the plate.

"The tea cups and the other cutlery have become so clean since I was last here, it's all thanks to Takasu-kun isn't it."

"......It's clean because I hired professional cleaners."

'I see' Taiga and Minori stood around the kitchen table like sisters, smiling at each other. The two of you are really close, Ryuuji poured boiling water into the teacups , and when he looked at the two of them again, he was already unable to follow their conversation.

"But I still think that Takasu-kun's been a great help, your apartment's been much cleaner since the last time I came about a year ago, you should really thank him."

'tsk' Ryuuji saw the look that Taiga threw him.

'This situation's not good' was the meaning behind that look. Because if that line of conversation continued, it would become 'Taiga can't be without Takasu-kun', do something, Taiga hurried him with her gaze, although to tell the truth, there was nothing that Ryuuji could do.

"Mm, This is all Takasu-kun's credit, I know because I'm the all-knowing God."

She even said that.....all he could do now was to pretend not to hear and continue pouring water into the teacups right? The most he could do was to just give a small smile: What more could he say to 'Because I'm the all-knowing God.'

At that moment,

"Aisaka, could you come over for a bit, there seems to be a problem with the wireless adapter, I can't go online."

"Hmm? Wasn't it working perfectly a moment ago?"

Even the gods are on my side---though it wasn't anything big, but it was just the respite that Taiga needed to make herself scarce.

While Minori continued the topic with Ryuuji,

"I really think so, because last year, no matter how much I cleaned up, the rubbish situation merely got worse after a week."

Ryuuji suddenly felt like something was wrong,

"......You're so close to Taiga, and yet you haven't come here in a year?"

The words were already out before Ryuuji seemed to remember Minori mentioning it before,

"That's because, you see.....I had a bit of a disagreement with Taiga over her father, though we made up almost immediately, but I felt that if I were to be so close to her, I might do something to hurt our friendship again."

"That.....That's right, I remember."

Listening to Minori's monologue, Ryuuji couldn't help but draw parallels to his own situation, but right now, Taiga was trying to be independent, and had stopped asking Ryuuji to help her with household chores.....

"I'm saying that, you've done very well, Takasu-kun!"

You have the force of will to not fear defeat, Minori continued. She also patted Ryuuji near his wrist in a boyish manner. Normally Ryuuji would have been extremely happy at such close contact, but today, he was trying to solve the problem of 'what should I say to her',

by the time he had decided to open his mouth, Minori had already began to prepare the sugar and milk for the tea, her turned back seeming to convey the message: That's all for this topic.

Looks like there's nothing I can do, Ryuuji could only give up, and started to wipe his hand with a dry towel. The rest of the group seemed to have started chatting idly because the Internet was broken, while Taiga and Kitamura were trying to fix the problem at the far end of the wall.

--- In a moment of almost unnatural quietness, Ryuuji suddenly thought: When was Taiga able to act so naturally around Kitamura?

"Hey, Takasu-kun."

"......Don't stand behind me."

"Don't copy my words."

Pushing a lock of her hair behind her earlobe, Minori smiled at Ryuuji, as he tried to recall when she had started to look at him like that.

"Well, actually, this school trip, I'm kind of looking forward to it,.....no, I'm really looking forward to it."

Desperately trying to hide his inner thoughts, Ryuuji forced out a surprised expression.

"Really? About skiing?"

"I'm rather proficient at skiing you know.....And, this is the last time that everyone in 2-C will get to play together. Ah, I've had a really great time in this class, so I feel really lonely about leaving it, Takasu-kun feels the same way don't you?"

As if she was confirming the quality of the teacups, Minori lowered her head to look at the bottom of the nine teacups,

"How nice it would be if everyone could stay the same way forever."

Forever? Everyone? You mean---Something bothered him about this, but just at that very moment, Taiga and Kitamura's conversation was heard from the other side of the apartment,

.....Really?

Yeah. That's why, how about I.....

.....Then I'll.....

Oh? Well, that's fine....but why? Just like I thought, did something happen?

He didn't know what they were talking about. It didn't seem to have anything to do with the internet connection. Kitamura still had that hurt look on his face from his old wounds, while Taiga, without stammering or panicking, simply smiled comfortingly at him.

The two of them looked so natural and comfortable with each other, as though they had known each other for years, seriously, when did they start to---

".....Oh, that's right."

The feeling that was nagging him vanished as if it had been solved.

"If only all this could go on forever."

Almost subconsciously, Ryuuji answered as he started to place the teacups onto a plate.

Had the knot in his heart finally been released, or had it become so tight and small that he was unable to see it anymore? Ryuuji didn't know.

To get all the relevant background information on the place, and to create a plan of movement for the according to the opinion of all nine of them. This piece of homework was only finished on the weekend of the second week. The only one who was enthusiastic to the end was obviously the model student, Kitamura.

And just like this, each day continued to go by, never returning ever again---

Chapter 4

To confirm what Minori really thinks.

In other words, to confirm whether Kushieda Minori is willing to go out with Takasu Ryuuji. And would her thoughts be affected by the fact that Takasu Ryuuji is no longer involved with Aisaka Taiga's life?

If he could obtain the answer to that, then he would be able to relay the thoughts that he was not able to relay during that night on Christmas Eve, and once again repair the awkward relationship between themselves.

For Ryuuji, this was the true purpose of the field trip.

"Takasu, it's your turn! The word is 'come'."

"... 'Come on'!"

Ryuuji quickly snatched the microphone which Kitamura, who sat beside him, handed over and yelled his answer. "That's your answer!?" "I thought the topic is only limited to painful, sadness and bitter stuff?" -- All the classmates in the coach booed at Ryuuji as a result.

Ryuuji quickly cleared his throat,

"Um... ah... 'come for over time'! That's painful enough, right? The word is 'time', next!"

Ryuuji randomly gave his answer, and passed the mike to Taiga, who sat at the other side of the aisle,

"'Time'!? Time out... no, that won't do. Um... time, 'time to move home'! That should be painful! OK, Minorin, ' home'."

"Great answer!" Everyone approved Taiga's 'time to move home' answer.

It was the first day of the field trip.

Six coaches were transporting the entire second year students towards their destination, the snow mountain ski field. But as the scenery along the highway was too boring, the students began to get carsick. So someone took out a microphone and suggested, "Let's sing some karaoke!" But there were only enka songs available on the coach, so the students of Class 2-C ended up playing shiritori with a specific theme.

Though it was quite mundane, and the mood wasn't really that enthusiastic, but at least it was better than watching the dull gray tarmac road outside.

"'Home'... 'home', and it has to be something painful and sad..."

The mike had now passed to Minori, who knelt on her window seat with one leg. She seemed to be in deep thought, as she grunted silently while furrowing her brows, since the punishment for whoever loses was to keep singing until they drop dead.

"Kushieda, your time's almost up!"

"OK! Time to countdown! Ten! Nine--! Eight! Seven! Six--! Five! Four! Three--! Two! One..."

As everyone clapped with the countdown, Minori suddenly took a deep breath, and then her eyes narrowed,

"HOME------!!!" She yelled with veins popping out of her forehead, the mike amplified her voice throughout the coach. "My ears!" "That's too loud!" "Are you crazy!?" ... The whole class writhed in agony, but Minori took no

notice of them, as she held the mike with her right hand, while her left hand shivered as she said,

"... Was where I felt a sudden impact, not knowing what was going on. But as I opened my eyes, I realized I couldn't speak... Why!? Why was it there?"

As though going through some spiritual connection, Minori's panting sound was transmitted through the mike, but she continued,

"Why was it there? Did I throw it away already? I took it to the shrine to have it exorcised, and I already prayed and apologized to it, but why did that cursed doll still returned to my room? I certainly didn't take it home, but there it appeared right before me! I quickly clasped my palms and begged it, 'Please stop following me already. There's nowhere for you to stay here, I no longer need your protection.' I was so afraid that I didn't notice the doll's eye sockets were hollow. I guess our eyes met at that moment, and I got terrified. Stop that! Stop that already! Please! Stop it stop it stop it stop it stop it stop it!!! Don't look at me don't look at me don't look at me don't look at me don't look at me!!! No, no, stop stop stop!!! Ah --- Stop that! Don't look at me!!!"

Minori shook the seat in front of her wildly, causing the girl sitting in front to yell softly; Taiga, who sat beside her, began moving her eyes around; even Ryuuji was out of breath and was unable to move, and could only cover his mouth like a speechless housewife. Though he was determined to ask Minori what her thoughts really were, no one had asked her to tell a scary story.

"'The one who has no where to stay... is YOU!!! HAHAHAHAHAHAAAAAAA!!!"

"Kyaaaaa!!!" "Noooooo~~!"

Surrounded by horrendous screams everywhere, Ryuuji quickly closed his eyes. "Eek..." Even Taiga was cuddled up and covered her ears as she whimpered softly.

"Your story was hardly scary at all, what's scary was really your voice and expression!"

Ryuuji very much agreed with Kitamura's opinion, but looking at Minori, it didn't seem like she was feeling sorry about it, and only stuck her tongue out in jest and smiled,

"And so that's it. The syllable is 'Aaa'. You're next, Amin."

"... How was that story bitter anyway!?"

"That was a true ghost story titled 'Not my doll', which is actually a bit bitter."

Minori remained squatting on her seat as she passed the mike to Ami sitting behind, who was feeling rather unpleasant from the scary story just now, and flicked her hair roughly as she received the mike and clicked her tongue. "Tch!"

At first Ami had no intention of joining the field trip, and she told the 30 Year Old Single Lady that she needed to take a vacation so she could work, but she got flatly refused. "You're a student, and joining a field trip is your obligation!" Since she couldn't use her work as an excuse, there was no other way she could get out of this, and so she ended up coming along.

"'Aaa' is it? 'Ami-chan's mood right now'! Maya your turn! The word's 'now'!"

"Great answer! As expected from Ami-chan!" The classmates applauded wildly, but Queen Ami-chan's

mood hardly improved as she sulked and hid her face beneath the curtains.

"Ehhh~~!? 'Now'... 'Now I got dumped on Valentine's Day'."

"Kihara... you started with 'ehh~~'!"

"That doesn't count, so you lose!"

Maya quickly complained, "How come Kushieda's scary story and Ami talking about her mood is counted, but getting dumped on Valentine's Day isn't!?" Unfortunately, there was no fair judge to mediate. Everyone, including Ryuuji, no longer wished for the mike to return to Minori, neither did they want to provoke Ami again, who was in a bad mood. Besides...

"Well, that's because we all want to hear Maya-chan sing enka, heh heh heh!"

Haruta said with a smile that looked disgustingly smug, much to the agreement of most of the guys.

"What!? What kind of joke is this!? How can that not be counted!? Of course getting dumped on Valentine's Day should be counted!"

The coach entered a tunnel. Ryuuji, who was about to say something, felt his ears ringing as a result, and so frowned and swallowed what he was about to say.

The tunnel was short, and very soon a bright spot could be seen at the end, and it was getting larger.

"... Eh!?"

Maya, who still held the mike, was the first to exclaim.

Ryuuji was suddenly blinded by a bright flash of whiteness, just when he was confirming what that brightness was, his breath was quickly taken away by the dazzling sight.

"No way! It's snow! Snow! Now's not the time for shiritori! This is too beautiful!"

Hearing Maya yelling into the mike, Ami too opened her eyes and jumped up, "Wow! Amazing!" Ryuuji and the others too all sat properly, making all sorts childish exclamations at the view outside.

For the first part of the journey, all they could see was dirty snow under the road fence, which was more black

than gray, but now was different. Ryuuji and Kitamura grossly squeezed their faces together onto the window and cried out like girls,

"Awesome...! What's all that glittering stuff!? It can't be snow!? In this fine day!?"

"It is snow! Oh wow! Since when did we enter the world of Kawabata Yasunari? This is too beautiful!"

The coach was bathed in a dizzying white light, as the view outside was glittering.

"Beautiful!" The classmates seated by the windows all opened them, and the coach was quickly filled with the fresh, cold air from outside. Everyone felt refreshed upon breathing in that air, as though being reborn.

Emerging from the tunnel, they were faced with a white, silvery and shining world, the reflection of light by the snow was dazzling, it was different from any of the snow they had ever seen.

"Wow! This is the first time I've seen something like this!" Taiga yelled as well, sticking her head outside the

window with Minori. *This idiot might just fall out the coach like that!* Ryuuji secretly worried, but was soon relieved when he saw Minori tightly grabbing Taiga's jacket.

Everyone was kneeling on their seats and watching the view outside.

"Fantastic! Oh wow, I think I'm getting excited!"

"I never knew a snow mountain can get me fired up like this!"

"Snow country! This is snow country!"

"Wow~~! Camera! Quick! Someone get this on camera! "

The mountain range that the noisy students of Class 2-C was heading towards shone in a solemn white, it's tough exterior was covered with white snow, while the golden sunlight shone on its peak, which shot skywards.

"Hey, this trip may turn out to be great! Snow mountain's not that bad!" The thoughts of the entire Class 2-C were now combined as one.

Even the 30 Year Old Single Lady sitting at the front turned her head excitedly and pointed towards the peak and said,

"Alright everyone, feeling fired up!? Let us all yell loudly at the mountain we're about to visit---"

"AHHHHHHHHHHHH-----!!!!!"

Their voices were in unison, so were their hearts. Amidst the excited cheers and applause, the driver silently muttered,

"... We're not even headed towards that mountain at all ..."

* * *

"Hey, no fair... How come you managed to look cool in that?"

"Really? Cool? Well, I guess I do look good in these track suits."

Under Noto's envious stare, Kitamura stood at the gathering point while looking at his own rented skiing costume. This costume can only be described as "very purple", from top to bottom, while emblazoned on the chest and legs were some "very golden" lightning logo. In any way, it was a hard to describe skiing costume, while the material was made of silk... That's right, silk.

Just the costume alone was already weird enough, but everyone was also required to have a large name badge placed on their chest. The name badge wasn't even white, it was light blue, which seemed to be the representative color of Class 2-C. The students from other classes also wore melancholic expressions, for they had to adorn their own colored name badge for their class, ranging from green, dark red, bright red, and brown.

Ryuuji thought, *It's incredible that Kitamura can make this look good on him.* Wearing his skiing boots, he looked quite dashing as he stood on the firm snow. Whether it was how he wore the costume, or the fact that he's an athletic youth to begin with, that skiing costume suited him just as it would suit a member of a proper skiing

team. Even Ryuuji had to agree with Noto, *Kitamura's not playing fair.*

Not long after arriving at the hotel, each person received this hideous skiing costume. Each team of boys and girls went to their own rooms to get changed. (The rooms were quite difficult to describe in words. To put it simply, it would be the type of Japanese-style rooms that would make Minori pretty excited.) After changing, they were to gather at the entrance of the ski-slope not far from the hotel according to their class.

"Takasu, you certainly look frightening in that..."

"Shut up. I don't need you to tell me that."

Seeing Noto's apologetic eyes, Ryuuji bit his lips hard. For someone with a face that resembled a Buddha when smiling, a demon when crying, and a fugitive when speaking, there was no way such a colorful skiing costume could match up with him. Ryuuji looked as deplorable as those dolls with exchangeable heads, or rather, like a transvestite assassin who lost his makeup after an intense battle.

As for Noto, he resembled one of those puppets in those old traffic safety ads.

"Ha! I have discovered the secret to why Kitamura looks good in this skiing costume! That's because he's wearing a fur cap and hanging a pair of goggles over his neck! Noto-chan, Taka-chan, let's learn from him as well! "

Haruta, who was constantly mumbling, resembled a delinquent that just came out of jail and found himself coming to the wrong place... in other words, extremely pathetic. Though they decided to believe Haruta's suggestion, and mimicked Kitamura by wearing a cap and hung a pair of goggles...

"..."

"..."

"..."

They each had different reactions, since they were speechless at how each other looked. They just looked different, there was no way they could match Maruo the girl-magnet... Though there was no point in them laughing at each other and hurting each other's feelings either.

Forget it. No matter how lame and terrifying I look, my charm was never in my dressing sense anyway. Ryuuji came to that conclusion and breathed in the cold air from the snowy mountain. The air was fresh, and the lungs felt refreshed from its iciness and cleanness. Even the nauseating feeling in his head caused by the carsickness during the coach trip felt as though it was wiped clean by a paper wiper.

Above the concrete floor of the ski-slope entrance was a thick layer of snow as high as a person. There were students from other classes happily munching on the snow, leading to the local skiers to comment, "That's filthy..." *They're already high school students, and yet they still do something so embarrassing.* Though truth was, if no one were watching, Ryuuji would have done the same as well.

Actually, snow itself wasn't something to really marvel about, but as this was Ryuuji's first visit to a ski resort, as well as seeing this much snow, he never knew the snowy view could be this dazzling.

The scenery was so beautiful that the mother-complex within Ryuuji swore, *I've gotta take some photos later tonight to show to Yasuko!*

It was only now that the girls casually appeared. Upon seeing their outfit... "Pft!" "Wahaha! Look at you guys!" The guys quickly forgot their own appearance and pointed at the girls while laughing out loud.

And then...

"You look pathetic...!"

"Hahaha!"

Taiga, who tied her hair into long braids, had veins popping up her face. For even Ryuuji couldn't resist laughing upon seeing her outfit.

She was dressed completely in pink... or "extremely pink"! Adorned with a blinding green... or "extremely green" curved lines stretching from the left shoulder all the way to the right leg, as though trying to give a sense of speed. The material seemed to be made of silk... no, it was indeed made of silk. Not to mention the light blue colored Class 2-C name badge on her chest.

While the guys' costume was horrid, the girls' weren't any much better. For some reason the costumes were designed as a one-piece suit, with a slim waist area. Though when someone as small as Taiga puts it on, she

would look as though she has grown 1.7 times her size. It would only take a small gust of wind to blow her off to the mountains over the other side, just like Mary Poppins .

"Heh... heh heh heh! You look... heh heh heh!"

"What's so funny!? What's there to laugh at anyway!?"

Taiga was close to exploding, roughly kicking the snow as she treaded along,

"H, h, how do you expect me to maintain my dignity as a human being when I'm being forced to wear such a costume!? Do they seriously want me to take a class photo in this!? What if some incident were to happen someday, and this photo were to be used by all news outlets? Won't it be broadcast nationwide and on all magazine covers, as well forever archived in the National Library!? Just thinking about that is scary enough! I don't want this!"

"Well, it's fine as long as you don't commit any crime... "

"It'll be the same even when I'm a victim! This photo will be shown to the whole world... Pft! What is *that* you're wearing!?"

Taiga seemed to finally noticed what the guys were wearing. Ryuuji's appearance got her rolling on the ground laughing. "Suit yourself," Ryuuji was calm as a puddle, since Taiga looked just as hilarious. *That makes us even. Ah... The air sure is fresh, and what a wonderful scenery.*

An endless stretch of blue sky.

A slope went upwards from the entrance, at the top was a large wooden hut, while on its side was a ski elevator. The tracks of skis and snowboards sliding down formed a beautiful pattern on the slope.

While the sparse white ski track was dazzling to the eye, the students costume was so hideous that even the mountain gods would laugh at them if they saw them.

"Hey! You guys! Don't underestimate the snow mountain! And don't get charmed by yetis... WHOA!?"

Chasing behind Taiga was Minori, who quickly went speechless upon seeing the guys' attire,

"Wow... you guys have such colorful costumes as well that it's imprinted into my retinas... Kyaa!"

The guys also became speechless by the way Minori appeared.... she suddenly fell backwards, landing on the snow on her bottom, and spun in circles. At first they thought it was because the snow was too slippery...

"Ow! Hey! Who threw a banana skin here!?"

But next to Minori's feet... sorry, bottom, was a banana skin.

"Minorin, are you alright? Can you stand up? Are you hurt?"

Taiga went forward to help lift Minori up. "Here, take my hand." The guys weren't the only ones watching this commotion.

"Sorry about that, looks like my bum has... whoa!"

"WAH...!!!"

As usual, the clumsy Taiga slid down together with Minori, who was trying to get up, and they both fell on their bottoms at the same time, embracing each other and yelling while rapidly sliding down the icy slope.

"Hey, wait! No way!? Don't come over here!!!"

"Yah! It's dangerous! Stop!"

"Sorry~~!!!" Falling like bowling pins, the pretty girl trio who were standing together were also shoved into the soft snow.

"T... Taiga, Kushieda! What are you guys doing!?"

"Really~! It's embarrassing and cold..."

"S, s, s, s, sorry! Maya-sama, Nanako-sama! Here, take my hand! Sorry Amin! Are you okay?"

Minori bent down and lifted the three of them out of the snow one by one. Maya and Nanako, who were completely covered in snow, slowly got up--

"Amin? Huh? What's wrong?"

Someone couldn't get up.

Ami's head was buried in the snow, her bottom facing outwards. And she remained motionless in that strange posture. "No reaction, just like a dead person." Taiga muttered. Even Haruta was screaming... not because he got electrocuted, but because he heard what Taiga said.

"Oh no, Ami-chan must have lost her will to live, that's why she couldn't get up."

Maya looked at Ami's bottom and said, even Nanako nodded,

"The skiing costume is just too hideous, even just now we had to carry her over."

Ryuuji thought, *How could something this ridiculous ever happen?* "Alright!" As expected from Ami's childhood friend, Kitamura came towards her and said to everyone,

"Now this is going to look embarrassing for her, so please don't say anything while I do this!"

He wrapped himself around Ami and pulled hard, finally managing to pull Ami's upper torso up and removed the snow on her head,

"Ami! Get a hold of yourself! You alright?"

"... Where is this place...? What happened...? Am I dead...?"

Wearing a horrid skiing costume, Ami merely replied incoherently. Her pretentious mask and mischievous face had vanished, leaving behind a stupid looking face with an empty gaze and wide-opened mouth that hardly resembled that of a model.

"Wow, she really has lost the will to live, poor girl..."

"Anyone got a felt-tip pen? I'm sure Bakachi will return to her senses if you write 'CHANEL' on her costume."

Just when Taiga was seriously looking for a felt-tip pen, someone yelled,

"OK! Everyone gather up! Line up together according to your group... PFT!"

Everyone instantly stared at the 30 Year Old Single Lady, aka Koigakubo Yuri. Only she brought her own snow board and wore a trendy skiing costume. *And it's white! Damn her!* She quickly lowered her head and said,

"... Your costumes are really amazing... It's completely beyond my imagination..."

Standing before the single row of ultra purple and ultra pink army with light blue name badges on their chest, the 30 Year Old Single Lady struggled to contain her giggling. "Hee hee hee, hee hee hee, hee hee hee hee hee..." Not even covering her face with the roll-call book could conceal her laughing.

"Hmm." Kitamura correctly guessed the intention of his classmates, and instantly became a revolutionary warrior. Ami too stood up, her eyes filled with a dark rage. The objective: To rebel and take over the city. Kitamura raised his right hand,

"... Ready, aim..."

Everyone in Class 2-C picked up a snowball by their feet and held it tightly...

"Huh? What? No way? What's going on? Eh?"

"FIRE!!!"

"NOOOO~~!" At Kitamura's command, everyone mercilessly threw their snowball at the 30 Year Old Single Lady. The students from the other classes, along with the regular skiers, all pointed at her and laughed.

* * *

After greeting each other and warming up, the entire second year students were separated according to their groups and allowed to roam around freely. The snowy slope was scattered with purple and pink spots. To prepare for the proper lessons in the afternoon, there would be about an hour to allow the students to get used to the snow and recognize their skiing abilities.

At the wide skiing field under the gentle slope, the nine-person team led by Kitamura each put on their own rented skis.

"Whoa...! Whoa, whoa, I'm sliding! What do I do with this!?"

This was Ryuuji's first time riding on skis, after taking his time to fasten his ski boots onto the ski bindings and managing to stand up, he began to slide wobbly down the slope.

"Change the direction of the skis so that they're perpendicular to the slope!"

Kitamura quickly suggested, but...

"Wha!? Perpendicular!? How do you... WHOA!?"

"Use your poles! If you can't stop then land on your backside! Stay calm and don't hurt your knees! Move your centre of gravity forward!"

"Wha!? Whoa, whoooaa!!!"

The poles were not much use as they were being swung round and round, the V-shape made by the skis was getting wider and wider. *My legs will rip apart!* Ryuuji panicked, and after losing his balance beautifully rolled onto the surface.

"... This isn't fun at all!"

Ryuuji sat up and grumbled, staring at his skis which were facing towards the blue sky. Besides that he also saw...

"Alright~~ Look at this snow, this is great~~ Heh heh~~ watch this~~"

Minori paced forwards and backwards on the firm snow, making sure the snow could withstand her weight. She then stepped onto her skis and began twisting her hips left and right.

Ryuuji couldn't understand her behavior. Finally Minori skied down along the slope in one go, causing snow to fly all over before turning rapidly to stop. She could already perfectly control her skis just by moving her centre of gravity.

That movement was so awesome that Ryuuji even forgot how pathetic he looked as he remained lying on the snow. He was totally mesmerized by the sight of Minori skiing. Her short hair could be seen under her furry cap, which made her look cute in a way. Ryuuji couldn't move his eyes away.

Ami clapped with her rented gloves, speaking out what Ryuuji was thinking,

"Minori-chan you sure can ski! You look good, as expected from a sporty girl!"

"Heh heh, really! By the way, Amin you're good at it as well!"

"Eh~~ no way, that's impossible! This is just normal~~!
"

Ami, who kept on saying her skiing was normal, was sliding smoothly forward on the slope less mountain as though skating. Humming, she placed her centre of gravity on one foot while dancing an elegant dance, and returned to the spot after drawing a curve on the snow. *If this is "normal", then what am I who can't even stand properly? A freak!?*

Ryuuji has been trying to stand up, but his skis kept bumping into each other, and the front parts were hooked together, which meant he was unable to move freely. Not to mention half of the ski was stuck in the snow, further adding to his immobility. And so he lay there paralyzed. *For me to look so pathetic, I guess I'm hardly normal.*

Ryuuji panted while lifting his head up in an embarrassing posture, and saw Maya and Nanako smiling happily,

"Lessee, form a pizza shape... Hey, I did it, I did it~~! Pretty good, huh~~?"

"Slowing down with the V-shape technique. I never thought that I would still remember something I learned back in 1st year of junior high!"

Even they are skiing well! Besides Minori, Kitamura and Ami, it seemed this wasn't the first time Maya and Nanako had skied as well.

2－C
木原
2－C
香椎

Don't tell me I'm the only one in this group that can't ski? Wouldn't that be damn lonely? I've got to find someone else who can't ski! And just at this moment,

"Takasu, why're you sitting there like that? Let's ski!"

Noto's glasses reflected the sunlight, and trudged roughly forward before Ryuuji's face. And just behind him--

"Actually, I'm better at snowboarding~!"

With his long hair fluttering, even Haruta slid in an elegant movement as he came before Ryuuji, and even happily hummed a song. Before Ryuuji could open the seal on his evil third eye on his forehead, he realized, *Oh yeah, I remember Haruta said before that his granddad used to live next to a skiing field.*

Ryuuji sensed himself being abandoned by everyone. " Traitors!" And glared and muttered at his friends. At this moment, a skiing pole suddenly slipped out of his hand, as he quickly tried to hang on to its strap, the pole had already slid rapidly down the slope. Ryuuji could hardly even get up, let alone chase it, and so he could only stupidly watch the pole slide even further away.

"Aha, found something!"

Whoosh! Someone spun around and spraying snow all over, and helped Ryuuji picked up his pole. It wasn't till she placed her goggles on her head that Ryuuji realized it was Minori. She just looked so energetic when she's engaged in sports.

"This is yours, right, Takasu-kun? How could you lose this? You gotta make sure you put the strap on properly! "

Even her lecturing looked so dazzling that Ryuuji struggled to open his eyes. Together with the shiny reflection of the skiing field, it looked as though Minori was really glowing brightly.

"Hey! Are you even listening!? Take it, and make sure you hold onto it tightly!"

"Oh... sorry!"

As though attracted by that smiling face, Ryuuji involuntarily stood up using the remaining pole on his hand. *Hey, I stood up! Maybe skiing could be easy after all...* Just when he was thinking like that...

"... WHOA!?"

He slipped, and was heading towards Minori. Ryuuji swung his pole trying to maintain balance, but his lower body was completely stiff, and the ski was spreading out towards different directions. "Whoa!" "It's good! Charge towards my embrace!" Minori robustly spread out her arms. "I hope so!" Ryuuji wanted to shout, but...

"Whoooooaaaa!!! I, I'm sorry...! This is too embarrassing...!"

"Whoa! It's alright... don't worry too much about it!"

There was nothing more embarrassing than this.

Ryuuji was practically leaping towards Minori. Thanks to her grabbing him firmly, he managed to come to a halt , but as a result, both had them had also fallen onto the hard snow...

"... I'm really sorry...!!!"

"It's okay! Really, don't worry about it!"

"I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry, ahhhh... I'm really sorry...!"

His constant apologies only made him look more pathetic. Ryuuji was lying on top of Minori, his terrifying looking face was rested on her chest and he could not get up. The more anxious he got, the more their skis got stuck together. As they were separated by their skiing suits, Ryuuji could hardly feel Minori's body. *How fortunate! No, I'm serious!* Ryuuji quickly tried to get up and moved his limbs about.

"... Takasu-kun, you really don't have to worry too much about this, and there's no need to panic..."

"No, no, no, no, no, I'm s, s, s, s, sorry! I'll get up right away! Just hang on!"

"... Actually, whenever you move your ski, you'll hook into my butt..."

"Whoooaaa!!! No waaaay!?"

As though being possessed, Ryuuji managed to push himself away from Minori, his face was as red as a drunk ghost. Using his goggles to conceal his flustered face, he sat on the snow and squirmed embarrassing,

"H, how could I do something like this...!? This is too embarrassing... I, I don't think I can live anymore! Please just leave me here and not pay attention to me anymore!"

"I should be the one who's embarrassed! Anyway, hurry up and get up! Come!"

"Whoa!?"

Minori slid gently and came behind Ryuuji, grabbing Ryuuji under his arm and pulled him upwards. Ryuuji could finally stand firmly.

"W, whoa, wait...! I'm sliding forward!"

"Oh dear... but hey, you can ski now! That's good! Keep it like that!"

"Of course not! This isn't skiing, I just can't stop sliding , that's all!"

Minori supported Ryuuji from behind, and they slowly slid down the slope while being together.

"Let your body remember this balance! We'll keep it like this for now~~!"

"No way!?"

Grabbing Ryuuji's armpits, she threw away her poles and placed her skis on top of Ryuuji's. After maintaining their balance, Ryuuji relaxed his knees and began to lean forward.

"Whoa... oh, oh, whoooaaa..."

This was his first time skiing. The four skis had managed to slide forward in this uneven slope. *I see. Since my ankles were fixed by the skiing boots, I had to use my knees in order to ski properly.* Though his body could now get used to this method...

"Whoa, hey! This is still quite scary!"

"Don't worry, you won't go too fast in this slope! Just make sure your skis don't overlap each other!"

"Whoooooaaaa!"

"Speak English!"

Minori yelled right behind the cautious Ryuuji,

"Very good! You've learned how to ski! You're amazing! I was in 3rd grade when I first learned how to ski, and this was how my dad taught me!"

"I, I feel... quite embarrassed!"

"Why's that?"

"I'm no 3rd grade schoolgirl, and you're not my dad!"

"Hahaha! Well said! You've won yourself a sitting cushion!"

What do you mean well said!? Ryuuji's retort was dispersed by the wind. Now he has indeed maintained a V-shape for his skis and slid slowly along the slope, as well as getting used to maintaining his balance. Though it was still very early, but he felt he had finally grasped the basics of skiing.

As a result of this, his other thoughts were quickly swept to the back of his head, replacing the anxiety in his head.

This included the feel those hands on his, as well as the breathing behind his back.

"...!"

As he realized this, those feelings were transmitted to Ryuuji's body even more through their costumes, and he became more mindful of how people would see them.

It wasn't long ago that Minori didn't dare to touch him anywhere save his sleeve, yet now she was embraced with him like this. *If she really hates me, she wouldn't do such a thing, would she? Just what is she feeling right now?*

"Alright! You should be able to ski on your own, right? I can let go now, right?"

If so... would I be able to get an answer different to the one I got during that night in Christmas?

"K, Kushieda...!"

Just what are her true thoughts..."

"WHOA! Don't turn around!"

"Whoa!?"

One movement had destroyed their subtle balance, and their skis quickly bumped and tangled into each

other. Minori fell towards the side while Ryuuji landed on his backside.

Though they had tripped, it was quite a hard fall, and for a while Ryuuji could hardly catch his breath.

"... Ow... Are you okay!?"

Ryuuji quickly looked for Minori.

"Ow ow ow... I'm okay! Nothing's happened to me!"

Right behind Ryuuji, Minori stood up while patting the snow off her suit, and wore back her fur cap as she looked at Ryuuji,

"If you're to ski, then you must be prepared for such small things! You've underestimate skiing! Alright! Now start by standing up by yourself!"

Minori pointed at Ryuuji like a teacher. "Whoa!" Though as he tried to get up, Ryuuji quickly fell back down facing the skies, spreading his arms out wide.

"Oh, what a pity! And you were just starting to get used to it! By the way.. where're my poles?"

Minori looked puzzlingly at her empty hand, Ryuuji nearly fell again,

"Weren't you the one who threw them off!?"

"Eh! Really? Darn, I picked up Takasu-kun's pole but tossed my own, I feel so stupid. I'm gonna go get my poles!"

Even without her poles, Minori still managed to trudge up the gentle slope on her skis, leaving a V-shaped markings on the snow.

Being left behind, Ryuuji could only look at her back, though he still couldn't get up.

Though it was different from what Minori said, but Ryuuji could feel it was good... the mood between the two of them.

If all this could go on smoothly... Now why am I still foolishly hoping for this!? I've already been dumped, isn't this a bit too shameless?

Looking around, he once again remembered the fact that he had been dumped. Suppressing his enthusiasm, he did his best to ignore the expectation slowly growing within his heart.

He breathed slowly, telling himself to remain calm, and removed the skis which he could hardly use while on his own. Yet his head was full of thoughts. *No! If I can't calm down, how am I going to find out what Minori truly thinks...*

"OOMPH!"

A sudden impact caused Ryuuji to land into the snow with his face. *WHAT THE HELL!?* As Ryuuji stuck his head out...

"Don't just stand there like an idiot, you wooden pole!"

He then realized he just got ran over.

Behind him was Taiga - her tiny figure was riding on a sled and barging everything she bumps into, and was now scowling fiercely at Ryuuji, who was at a loss of words and merely sat there,

"W... why... why you...!!!"

"Huh? Did you say something? Damn, you're in my way! It took me some time to get this thing moving smoothly forward, and now I've stopped again thanks to you!"

Taiga finished what she wanted to say, and sat upright on her red plastic sled, swinging her legs besides the sled in a vulgar fashion to move it forward, after a bit of acceleration the sled began moving again, however--

"OOMPH!!!"

"HEY!"

2－C
逢坂

She once again ran over Ryuuji.

"Enough! You're really pissing me off! Why did you go under my sled!?"

"W, w, w... what did you say!?"

Ryuuji stood up angrily, yelling at Taiga as he approached her,

"I should be the one asking why! Why'd you run over me!? Can you please not run over me!? It's not like I want to be run over!"

"Oh shut up, there's no need to yell so loud... What? You sure are annoying, why're you so worked up? Did something piss you off? Alright, alright, I get it, I'll do as you say. Think of it as a special treat from me."

Taiga shrugged her shoulders as a matter-of-factly, her eyes had that "So what?" look on her as she lifted her haughty face and smiled a generous smile.

That face, and that manner of speech.

"NNGGGHHHAARRRRGGGHHH!!!" This was the first time Ryuuji's throats has made such a wail, which when translated into American English would be " Goddamit!", and in Chinese would be "Aiyaaa!" Yet Ryuuji would use "nngghhaaargh" to express that feeling . He placed his hands on his head before spreading them outwards and yelled again,

"What's pissing me off is that I've been run over! By you! And that sled! TWICE!"

"It's not like I want to ride on this sled."

Taiga sat properly on the sled and placed her hand under her chin, and gave a reply which had nothing to do with Ryuuji's fury. "Wha!?" Ryuuji grunted while thinking, *If those ears of hers are incapable of comprehending human speech, she might as well discard them!*

"I tripped twice after renting the ski and headed towards this way, and both times my skis had ended up hitting the 30 Year Old Single Lady. After picking up the ski for the second time, I tried to get to where everyone was, but when I turned around, the skis whacked her yet again."

"T... this really is..."

Something worth listening to... I must remember not to get too near Taiga whenever she's holding onto any long objects.

"So she said it was too dangerous and forbade me from using skis, so I had to ride on a sled instead. Is this something a teacher should be saying? Oh well, since I can't ski, and this suit sucked anyway, so I don't really care."

"WHAT!?" Ryuuji couldn't help yelling, and pointed towards Taiga, his eyes gleaming,

"So you can't ski!"

"Why're you suddenly getting so excited for? How gross!"

Though Ryuuji still felt pain at the back of his head, at least he discovered something useful - someone other than himself who can't ski. That's right, he had nearly forgotten about the existence of the clumsy dumb tiger.

"And I thought I was the only one in our team who couldn't ski, so you couldn't as well."

"Eh!? No way! Though it's expected that Minorin and Kitamura-kun could ski, but is it true!? Even that idiot could ski!?"

"Just look for yourself, he's pretty much enjoying himself."

"EHHH!?" Taiga looked at Haruta, who leisurely skied past them, and moaned. She rubbed her eyes like a comic character, making sure she saw it right.

"This must be the end of the world... sigh... skiing's so boring. Why must I sit on this long board in order to ski? We're not exactly Eskimos, there's no meaning riding on this thing."

"I feel the same way... but you shouldn't be moaning. How about asking Kitamura to teach you? That guy loves teaching people. Or has he already taught you with all his passion?"

"What's there to learn with riding a sled?"

She's right, actually. Sitting firmly on the sled, Taiga just seemed quite persuasive,

"What about you... shouldn't you be seeking Minorin's help rather than lecturing me?"

"For your information, she already has. If it wasn't for you running over me, I would have continued going after her already."

"Wha? What's that supposed to mean? Stop trying to shirk responsibility, you hopeless dork!"

"Hmph!" Taiga turned her head away and snorted, puffing white steam out of her nose,

"Really... looking at you. What's the point of me volunteering to live on my own?"

Come to think of it... Ryuuji realized he hadn't talked alone with Taiga in a long time. It wasn't long ago that the two of them were doing the same things together every day and every night. Even just chatting for a while like this, he found that the muscles he rarely used were starting to become stiff and fatigued.

"... That's right, I never thought you would last this long."

Ever since Ryuuji got hospitalized -- which happened that Christmas night after he got dumped by Minori, Taiga had not been spending her time with Ryuuji. Though they still saw each other at school, it was really a long time since they were alone together.

"You've been working hard."

Hearing Ryuuji say that, Taiga proudly puffed her chest and flicked her braids away and said,

"Of course! And I'm going to keep working hard for the rest of my life! You should as well, as gratitude for my kindness! I'm not doing this for you, ultimately I'm doing this for myself."

.. To continue practicing living alone and become a grown-up.

"And that's it. Now get out of the way! Or you'll be run over by me again!"

"... Aha! So you *did* do it on purpose!"

"Oh well, that was just a different way of expressing it. "

Taiga revealed an evil smile and began to move the sled, preparing to slide down the slope.

"Whoaa!?"

Is this divine punishment? The sled suddenly fell backwards before Ryuuji, the flying snow making a strong contrast with the blue sky. Seeing such an elegant tumble, even Ryuuji couldn't help but yell,

"I don't believe this! Really... you can even trip while riding on a sled, just how did you manage that!?"

"Owww~~ That gave me a fright, I pushed too hard!"

Ryuuji carried his heavy snow boots and trudged towards Taiga, after pushing the overturned sled away, he attempted to give a hand to Taiga, who was covered in snow.

"I don't need your help!"

Taiga bluntly rejected his offer, and stood up by herself, patting off the snow in her suit and climbed back on the sled.

"I think... it's a bit dangerous for you to be riding a sled by yourself, how about you play something else?"

Ryuuji instinctively placed his foot onto the sled. Taiga turned her head and clicked her tongue, glaring at him with a twisted face,

"Shut up, I told you I'm fine! Get your foot off! Scram!"

"I can see it already... As you slide down the slope, you find that you can't stop, and after crashing into a wooden hut, you'll break a bone and you'll cry... From then on, whenever it rains, gets cold, or becomes humid, that wound will torment you for the rest of your life... That's how it'll be... You poor thing."

"Why you..."

Feeling scared, Taiga widened her eyes. It seemed like Ryuuji's words had affected her as her face stiffened,

"You say you're worried about me, yet you still manage to say such inauspicious stuff..."

"Well, it is possible. Especially for someone as clumsy as you."

"I told you I'll be fine! I don't need you to look after me anymore! Let go of your stinking foot!"

Taiga yelled as though about to bite, and moved her legs as she attempted to move the sled. *It's not my feet that stink, it's those boots...* Ryuuji thought of such mundane stuff while biting his dried lips.

That's right, maybe Taiga doesn't need me to take care of her anymore. No, rather than not needing, what's more important is that I shouldn't be obstructing Taiga, stopping her as she struggles to be independent, regardless of whether it's dangerous or not.

If I forcefully stop her, it'll be like I'm sulking at the fact that I don't want Taiga to grow up before I do.

Maybe it means I'm really hopeless.

"LET--- ME--- GO---!"

"..."

Just as Taiga pushed forward with all her might, Ryuuji also lifted his foot.

"WAHH---!? Don't suddenly let go---!!!"

"Ah...!"

Taiga's kicking on the snow was more powerful than Ryuuji had imagined, without any obstacles, the sled went full speed down the slope, not even Ryuuji could stop it if he stretched his arm out. "I----- CAAAAAAAN'T----- STOOOOOOP-----!!!" Only Taiga's screams remained behind as she slid three meters down.

"OOMPH!"

And smacked right into a small snowy dune. The sled was completely upended, and Taiga was thrown forward , burying her face in the snow. "I told you so..." Ryuuji muttered softly.

"I don't need you to help me! But it's definitely your fault that I've tripped!"

Taiga said in a low, threatening voice while covered all in snow. Ryuuji stood still and lifted his hands high, stating that he understood and wouldn't make any move.

POW!

At this moment, a torrent of snow flew towards Taiga, startling her and causing her to fall again. As she was still wondering what happened--

"KYAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHA! AHAHAHAHAHAHEEHAHAHAHAHAWAHAHAHA !!!"

The non-stop laughter echoed around. The one who used the tip of her skis to shove the snow into Taiga, and laughing till her jaw nearly dropped was none other than Ami.

"Bakachi... you bastard..."

"How pathetic! I can't believe you managed to trip even on a sled, that has got to be a rare sight! How can there be such a klutz like you? Ami-chan is head over heels. But isn't that a bit sad? Though looking at it another way, it's actually a talent, kyahahahahaha!"

Ami pointed at Taiga with her ski-pole and laughed till tears came out her eyes. Taiga's eyes slowly changed, her pupils slowly widening, and her curly hair starting to straighten.

"... Kawashima, shouldn't you start running?"

"Ami-chan's skiing isn't so poor that she would get chased by someone who can't even ride on a sled. Come on, you can chase me if you have a problem. Who knows, you might actually chase me if you roll over in a snowball like a comic character? Pft... hahaha!"

"See ya~~!" Ami prepared to ski off elegantly, but...

WHAM!

The sled which Taiga threw out had smacked the back of Ami's head with precision. Before the trembling Ryuuji, Taiga silently pounced on Ami, who had fallen on the snow.

The scene resembled one of those Tibetan sky burials. " Stop!" Taiga sat on Ami, who was lying on the snow, and slowly removed her skis. "AAAAHHHH!" Her skiing costume was being yanked and her lifeless limbs were about to be torn apart.

"S, she's being eaten...!"

Even Ryuuji felt terrified and covered his mouth. Taiga was sitting on top of Ami, who was frothing at the mouth, and after holding onto one of Ami's sockets, laid her fangs down and took a bite.

"Hahahaha!" At this moment, Kitamura arrived behind them with a casual demeanor, turning while carrying a smile which you often see in TV commercials, and took off his goggles as he asked,

"Ami, Aisaka, what're you guys doing? Even if the snow mountain environment is relaxing, you mustn't do anything weird... OWWW!"

Ami, who was trembling non-stop, used her final breath to swing her skiing pole and jabbed it towards Kitamura's crouch.

* * *

"Kushieda, Ami and Haruta will go to the Advanced

Level Class; I, Noto, Kihara and Kashii will go to the Intermediate Level; while Takasu and Aisaka will go to the Beginner's Level."

"Got it." After hearing Kitamura announce how the team will be split up, the rest of the team all responded politely.

The weather was still fine, the illumination of the strong afternoon sunlight made the white skiing track even more dazzling. It was so bright that one might think he might go blind without goggles.

After splitting up based on their abilities, the students began to commence their skiing lessons in earnest for the afternoon. As they came to the ski lift terminal, they each split up accordingly.

"Don't you have the guts to go up the hill with the Advanced Class?"

"... You sure demand stuff which even you yourself can't accomplish. I think I'll stay with sleds."

Whispering together, Ryuuji and Taiga sighed. During lunch, they have heard that the Beginner's Class was only a class in name, it simply involved gathering those who

can't ski and have them ride on sleds and build snowmen at their own leisure.

Why must we do such things on a school field trip? On the other hand, this is far less painful than falling in the snow while skiing. If I forced myself to join the Advanced Class just to be with Minori, I'll end up being an annoying burden as everyone will have to take care of me. No matter what, I really can't expect Minori to stand behind and support me all the time when I can't even stand on the skis on my own, can I?

"Then let's head for the ski lift terminal! Follow me! Remember to hang your ticket straps over your necks!"

Kitamura showed his leadership skills as he stood charmingly at the front, and everyone began following him and marched forward. The other classes also began walking towards the terminal. It was quite a sight to behold to see an army of colorful costumed students trudging along with skis in their hands.

Maya hurried up alongside Kitamura and said to him,

"The ski lifts are double seaters, right? I want to sit with Maruo~!"

Hearing this, Ryuuji instinctively turned to look at Taiga, who was walking just behind him. Yet Taiga merely shrugged her shoulders, mainly because they were headed in different directions, and wouldn't be riding together anyway.

"Alright, I'm fine with it. But don't you want to ride with Kashii?"

"We want to take pictures of each other while riding on the ski lifts! We won't be able to photograph ourselves fully if we were riding together. Right, Nanako?"

Maya waved her newly dyed brownish hair and jabbed at her friend Nanako, who then smiled her usual elegant smile and said,

"Yeah, that's right."

She then looked at Ami standing beside her. Ami rolled her round chihuahua eyes and smirked. *Seems like the Pretty Girl Trio had already come up with a plan to capture Kitamura. Taiga must be feeling anxious!* Ryuuji got close to Taiga's face and asked,

"... Taiga?"

"EH!? W, what!? Don't suddenly lean your face over like that!"

Upon looking at Ryuuji's eyes, Taiga instantly leaped off five meters.

What's with her...? Ryuuji frowned and wondered, *Taiga definitely looks strange. Her crush Kitamura is about to get snatched away by Maya, and yet she's acting oddly.*

"... Is it me or are you behaving strange lately?"

"Lately? What do you mean lately? And how am I strange? I'm pretty normal! N-O-R-M-A-L, you see?"

Something IS wrong with her. How is that normal? Especially her relationship with Kitamura.

It's not just her behavior now. Now that I think about it, something hasn't felt right for some time now, it's as though Taiga's no longer as close to Kitamura as before.

If it were the Taiga before, she would quickly lose her bearings upon finding out that the field trip would be divided into teams, and would blush and shout, "I wanna be in the same team as Kitamura-kun!" Though

she still ended up being on the same team as Kitamura, yet when he found out about it, he discovered Taiga was actually more concerned that he and Minori would be on the same team. Maybe it had something to do with Ryuuji getting dumped by Minori, yet for some reason, Taiga's relationship with Kitamura, how should one say it, had somehow got cooler...

"... What do you want? Will you please stop staring at me? That's horribly gross!"

"..."

"I said don't stare at me!"

No, I had to stare.

Now I remember, could it be the opposite? Ryuuji recalled during the meeting in Taiga's place, the way Taiga conversed with Kitamura. *It just felt strange now that I think about it. They were too natural, and too close. As though they didn't need to say anything else. They would understand what each other was saying just by mentioning "that incident before".*

"... Did something happen between you and Kitamura?"

"EHHH!? N, No! O, o, o, of course not! Nothing's happened... has there? Though I say nothing, but if I have to say it, I guess... there's something... How should I say this... Um..."

Before Ryuuji's low inquisitorial voice, Taiga's face changed colors as quickly as a traffic light. It was a rare stunt to behold.

"H, haven't I told you before? T, that's right. I went to the shrine, you know... for the New Year's prayers? We went together."

"..."

Why didn't you tell me?

-- Ryuuji couldn't say it out, he quickly deduced that doing so would make the mood even more awkward and would get blown out of proportion.

You could've told me. Now I know why you two get along so well.

The reason Taiga didn't say this was because she was able to face Kitamura calmly. Her reaction was not one of coldness, but of calmness.

"Well, you just got out of hospital then! And one thing came after another! I can't be the only one happy around here? Like I said, I feel responsible for it, so... HEY! Why must I explain this to you!? What is this!?"

"... Why're you getting angry for!?"

Taiga's face went red, and then crimson red, she stomped the snow hard with her ski-boots and her eyes glowed,

"Why must I report everything to you? There're things I don't feel like saying! People that say whatever that comes out their heads are weird people! What's wrong with not saying something one doesn't want to say!?"

"I never said you were wrong! Why're you getting worked up for? There is something strange about this! You haven't been causing any trouble behind my back, have you?"

Even Ryuuji was taken aback by his own tone. Hearing Ryuuji's words, Taiga erupted and yelled,

"W, w, why you! How could I tell you everything!? There's *way* too many things you'll never understand for the rest of your life! I'd rather DIE than tell you! How could I tell you!?"

"Then suit yourself! If you don't want to say it, then don't! On the other hand, I have been telling you *everything*! Ah, so I see! So that's the way it is! I don't care ! Not at all! If you don't want to tell me or let me know, then take it with you to your grave! What's it got to do with me anyway!?"

"I was planning on doing that anyway! What do you know anyway!?"

Close to tears, Taiga lifted her sled and began to whack at Ryuuji. Ryuuji was not about to stand and get beaten, and so lifted his sled and retaliated. *Why are we fighting each other? Why did I make Taiga cry?* Even Ryuuji wasn't sure himself, he just felt mad that Taiga was hiding something from him, and even started attacking him, which was why he retaliated. *If I kept silent, I'll just get beaten up.*

As the red and blue sleds knocked onto each other, right behind them, Kitamura's voice boomed,

"WHY ARE YOU GUYS FIGHTING!?"

"It's all her fault!" Ryuuji turned around instinctively, and ended up getting whacked at the back of his head by Taiga's sled. "You bastard!" And kept on beating at him.

"Stop! Noto! Kihara!"

"Huh? He wasn't talking about us!?"

Ryuuji tripped at the surprise. "A person like you would never understand!" And managed to dodge Taiga's last attack. As she used too much force in that attack, she fell straight into the snow.

They finally realized they weren't the only ones fighting.

"Why are you always shamelessly getting in my way!? You're so annoying, annoying, annoying!!!"

Maya ignored Kitamura's calls and kept hitting Noto with her skiing pole. Seeing someone who rarely goes

ballistic doing so, Taiga commented, "She's gone mad...", while totally forgetting that she was the least qualified to say so. Noto was not content with being beaten, though, so he grabbed Maya's pole and threw it back.

"That's your problem, Kihara! Always doing whatever comes to your mind! Doing everything just to get what you want! You're the one who's devious!"

"I haven't been doing anything devious!"

"Yes, you have! Only thinking of yourself! It's the same every time! Just now as well---!"

Noto pushed his glasses and said, "... W, what's going on!?", only to be attacked by Maya's pole again.

"Oh, you two are done? They're just getting started over here."

Nanako nonchalantly kept a distance from the bickering pair, and explained to Ryuuji and Taiga what just happened.

A while ago when Kihara was planning to ride on the ski lift with Kitamura, Noto taunted her and said, " Kihara is up to something again." Upon hearing this,

Maya quickly retorted, "That's none of your business." To which Noto replied, "Always showing herself off. Sure pisses me off." -- What then followed was what everyone had seen.

"I've been wanting to ask you for some time now, Noto-kun. Why are you always obstructing me!? WHY!?"

"Who's obstructing you!? I was merely helping my good friend achieve happiness! Right, Haruta? You know I'm right!"

"Yeah~!" Haruta joined in the battle and placed his arm around Noto's shoulder,

"Sorry about that~ Kihara, but your devious plans are just~ too gross! Our legs are shivering just seeing all that. "

"Huh!? You idiots can go ahead and shiver your legs wherever you like, what's it got to do with me!?"

"Alright--- Enough, stop! Peace! How'd it become like this?"

Minori got in between them and tried to mediate, " Let's get along with each other, okay? We've come all this

way for our field trip! Okay, let's end this now and let me Kushieda take care of this!"

But Noto shoved Minori's shoulder and said, "What do you mean let you take care of this!? Kushieda, all you ever do is act crazy! Sorry, but I'm going to speak everything on my mind today! This is really pissing me off!"

"I'm the one who should be speaking my mind here!"

Maya and Noto glared even more furiously at each other. "When have I ever acted crazy!?" Minori protested loudly, but Noto and Maya both ignored her. Feeling troubled, Kitamura could only intervene by snatching away their skiing poles,

"Really strange! How did it end up like this? You guys should calm down and not get so upset!"

"... Oh my, looks like we have another fool here."

Hearing his childhood friend interrupting, Kitamura could not conceal the anger in his face,

"... When you say fool, were you referring to me?"

"If you don't understand the reason why they're fighting, then of course you're a fool. Sigh--- really, Yuusaku, are you born dense or are you just pretending to be dense?"

"What are you trying to say!? Stop being so pretentious and let it all out!"

This time it was Kitamura and Ami's turn to quarrel. Maybe because she was his childhood friend, his words were three times harsher than usual, while Ami's were five times that.

"You want me to say it, right? You really want me to say it clearly, right? Whatever it is that Ami-chan says, Yuusaku is just going to play dumb and say, 'Oh! I don't know anything!' And act all surprised without having to bear any responsibility. You always place yourself in a safe spot, and act so innocent as though it's got nothing to do with you. Excellent-- You're always like that, since long ago."

"What's that you say!? What do you mean by safe spot!? What do you mean by always like that!? When have I ever been like that!?"

"... Are you serious? You really don't know the reason why they're fighting?"

I don't believe this. Ami rolled her eyes and looked up towards the sky. Kitamura glared at her while looked irritated. Ryuuji thought, *That's the sort of person Kitamura is.* Even Noto and Haruta exchanged understanding glances. *That's how Kitamura always is, why are the girls acting as though they only realize now?*

Even Nanako, who had been quietly witnessing the whole thing, remarked softly,

"No way... Maruo, could it be that you're really that dense? Being ignorant is also another way to get people hurt, you know..."

"WAAAHHH!" --- Maya began crying. Nanako and Ami quickly ran towards her and embraced her.

"Are you alright!? Come on, stop crying, Maya-chan."

"You poor girl... Noto-kun you've gone too far. I think what you just said was very offensive, hurry up and apologize to Maya-chan."

"Me!? Why should I!? You're saying I started this!? In the end it's all my fault!?"

Under Maya's crying and Ami and Nanako's cold stares, Noto muttered, "I feel like crying as well, okay..." He was totally not cute, but still pitiable. So Ryuuji went towards him and patted him on the back.

"Takasu-kun, you traitor! Sniff sob!"

"Huh? Now *I'm* the villain!?"

Maya, her face full of tears, glared at Ryuuji,

"Ahn yoo on de same side as me---? I fot yoo were on my side---? Yet not only ah yoo not helpin me--- yoof even gone an patted dat bastard's back---! Wah---!"

What Maya was trying to say was: "Aren't you on the same side as me? I thought you were on my side? Yet not only are you not helping me, you've even gone and patted that bastard's back---! Wah---!"

Though she was unintelligible, good thing Ryuuji was used to hearing Yasuko talk like that all the time that he was able to understand. But even though he understood what Maya said---

"I, I already said you've got it all wrong!"

But Maya didn't seem to want to understand, and Ryuuji's words didn't get into Maya's heart. (To put it simply, Maya would never hear any words spoken by someone like Ryuuji.) Ami hugged Maya, who was crying nonstop, and glared at Ryuuji, so too was Nanako. "Hmph!" Taiga was ignoring Ryuuji for something completely different, and walked towards Ami. Even Minori had to sheepishly join in with the other girls, she too was staring at the boys, though she didn't ignore them with a "hmph!"

Ami looked at the girls around her, and nodded with a satisfied expression, and spread out her arms as the leader of the girls and said,

"Alright, everyone, let's take Maya-chan to the bathroom! You guys are the worst."

Staring at the boys, the girls walked slowly, with Maya at the centre, and walked away. Nanako even turned around and added a parting shot,

"To make a girl trying to get close to you cry... I think that's just too mean."

Other students nearby jabbed each other and asked, " Hey, what just happened?" "Looks like there was a fight!" "Someone got a girl crying!" "Ehh!?" The nosy crowd decided to interpret what just happened on their own.

The boys that were left behind looked at each other and nodded their heads.

We were definitely right.

There's no need to apologize to the girls.

Because we did nothing wrong.

Exchanging their thoughts telepathically, they placed their hands on each other's and shouted, "HA!" And motivated themselves. *In this way, who cares about skiing? Who cares about moving together as a team?* They quickly withdrew their hands since it was getting too gross, the four boys then went towards the ski lift heading towards the Beginner's Course.

They weren't going to ride on sleds, neither were they going to build snowmen. They just wanted to go to a place where no girl would be able to hear their moaning.

Chapter 5

In the end, it became almost impossible to get near to Minori at all --- By the time Ryuuji realized this, it was already dinner time, and everyone was dining in the hotel restaurant.

"Hey, I heard you guys got into a fight with the girls?"

"We heard you got Ami-chan mad? Just what happened between you guys?"

The boys in Kitamura's team were occupying a table, barely managing to place the cold brownish food stuff into their mouths. Students from other classes looked on curiously with their eyes gleaming, approaching them one by one to query quietly.

"Hard to say... to put in a nutshell, it's merely a dream if you ever want to be friends with girls. These people only think for themselves, toy with us guys, treat us like trash, justifying everything that they do. There's no way you can develop any friendship with them as equals."

Noto said while munching the vegetables in his mouth . "Enough, this conversation ends here." Kitamura stopped him from going further. The girls were more or

less the same, gossiping with students from the other teams.

Even with the heater on, the air was still quite cold in this spacious restaurant. Like a swarm of bees, the high school students were chatting everywhere. Under a sunlight that felt like a lamp that could be turned off anytime soon, everyone had removed their skiing costumes and changed into their own clothes, commenting on their same dishes. *The food's not really that nice, but it was fun to eat together... or that should have been the case.*, Ryuuji thought as he drank his miso soup and gulped his rice.

The girls over there are probably saying bad stuff about us right now. Maya was still feeling unpleasant, steadfastly refusing to look at the boys. Minori tried in vain to smile and talk with her, but to no avail.

At this rate, let alone just figuring out Minori's true feelings, I won't even get to talk to her, let alone approach her by the time this field trip ends. I didn't even get into a fight with her, but with things like this, it's not possible for me to even get near other girls.

Why must things turn into a boys versus girls fight? Sitting next to Minori, Taiga clutched her chopsticks, looking at her large plate of dried roast fish with troubled eyes. *That greedy girl couldn't even take care of one dish, looks like I'm not the only one feeling troubled right now.* But when it came to Taiga, Ryuuji wasn't as confused as to why it happened. Just now he was genuinely angry, and ended up fighting with her, even now he couldn't forget about it--- *Being whacked hard in the back of my head by her, it still hurts right now. After getting hit so many times, I can't even register a counter-hit, that's what pisses me off!*

"Hey~~ Taka-chan, you want seconds? Can I finish the rice in here?"

Ryuuji lifted his head upon being called, and saw Haruta clutching the rice pot. "I'll pass." Ryuuji shook his head, and handed all the rice to Haruta. Taiga wasn't the only one who had trouble consuming the terribly made roast fish, yet Ryuuji still moved his chopsticks and removed the bones from the fish.

"No appetite? For some time you've merely been poking your food with your chopsticks, but I don't see you ever taking a bite."

Sitting next to him, Kitamura said while looking at him. Ryuuji stopped what he was doing momentarily.

"Hmm? What's wrong? Something happened?"

"No... nothing."

Seeing Kitamura's face, Ryuuji felt like putting down his chopsticks. He had unknowingly remembered something that he didn't need to be bothered with.

Taiga wasn't the only one that didn't tell him about going to the shrine to pray during the New Year, Kitamura didn't tell him either. Now that he thought about it, when Taiga disappeared during the Christmas party, Kitamura didn't even bother asking where she went, this meant they had met each other already without him knowing. Ryuuji's eyes slowly moved away from Kitamura's tall nose.

Ryuuji certainly wasn't foolish enough to require Taiga to report everything to him, but it felt even more unnatural for her not to say anything. *It's as though Taiga and Kitamura are working together to hide something from me. .. This feels, how should I say it... Being isolated? Or am I just sulking?*

Ryuuji began to think in silence. *"There're things I don't feel like saying!" How did I feel when I heard Taiga say that? The world continues forward, and people get along with their lives whether I realize it or not --- Something so simple, I'm surprised I only now realized it.*

Even though I understand people have difficulties understanding each other, and I was never so conceited as to think that I would understand anyone, yet was my thinking self-centered after all? Or...

"You don't look well... was it because of your fight with Aisaka early this afternoon?"

"No... My stomach's feeling unwell, that's all. Sorry about that, didn't realize you guys were still eating."

Kitamura may be dense about his own situation, but he can be pretty sharp in assessing other people's circumstances. As though trying to avoid Kitamura, Ryuuji stood up. Feeling Kitamura's merciless glance behind him, he left the restaurant.

At the end of the tasteless carpet-laid corridor was a cold and dark lounge, right next to the restroom at the corner.

Maybe because it was so cold, there was hardly anyone in there. After picking a sofa and sitting down, Ryuuji sighed. When they asked him where he was going , he wasn't exactly lying when he said he was headed to the bathroom.

Behind the large window was a snowy view. Though it was already dark, there were still plenty of visitors enjoying a night time ski. Reflecting the glowing illumination, the skiing track glimmered in white.

When did it snow? Snowflakes could be seen floating under the lighting, so beautiful one wanted to record it with a camera. Though he thought of doing so, he didn't have the energy to. Ryuuji made a thinker's pose and closed his eyes.

"Sigh~~"

"Aha! You're sighing!"

Startled, Ryuuji quickly turned his head around.

"Gotcha!" There stood Minori as she imitated the "Get's " gun gesture. She wore a black waist tight jumper, with the zip pulled all the way up to her chin, while wearing a pair of track-suit trousers.

"How could you sigh on your own here?"

Minori smiled while looking at Ryuuji, who was too terrified to even breathe or think properly.

"... Why are you here...? Oh, are you going to the bathroom? I'm sorry, I was just sitting here, so don't mind me and go on ahead!"

He even gave Minori a cryptic V-sign. But...

"No! I saw you leave the restaurant, so I followed you while pretending to go to the bathroom."

"Eh..."

"There's something I needed to talk about with you."

Ryuuji went petrified on the spot in his V-sign pose. Minori quickly walked in front of Ryuuji, and sat on the sofa opposite the coffee table, looking directly at him. From a close distance he could see the deep glitter within

her beady black eyes, Ryuuji's heart felt like being clogged by something. He had wanted to ask why, but what he said was...

"Wherefore...?"

He ended up speaking like someone from the medieval ages, though Minori still understood him enough to reply,

"Actually I've been looking for a chance all along, it's just that Maya had a bust up with Noto, so..."

"Um, yeah..."

I've also been looking for a chance as well! Ryuuji thought from the bottom of his heart, and nodded stiffly like a puppet. *Hey, just what's going on here?* Though Ryuuji acted calm, his eyes were already burning, his neck was stiff and his body was shivering non-stop. He sat upright on the sofa and crossed his legs to prevent Minori from finding out, but he couldn't stop his body shivering nor his legs shaking. *Oh man, just have to pray the heavens for this.*

Could this be the moment---

To ask Kushieda Minori what her true feelings really are?

A chance to get a different answer?

Opening his mouth and closing it again, Ryuuji was at a loss on what to say, but sitting before him, Minori was furrowing her brow in a serious look and said,

"Everyone's fighting each other, I wanted to figure out a way to settle this peacefully."

She completely made no mention about anything related to their relationship.

"... SIGH!" Ryuuji couldn't help but sigh deeply.

It is just as well, there's no need to hurry. Just take it slowly .

"W... what do you plan to do?"

"That's why I need to talk with you. Because... I don't want a hard to come by field trip to end with everyone bickering. I wish for everyone to make up with each other, back to where it once was."

"Concerning this... my thoughts are exactly the same."

Probably even more so than you-- Ryuuji silently returned Minori's gaze. Minori nodded her head, removing her slippers, she placed her feet on the overly soft sofa,

"Is there a good way? The main problem of all this... or rather the main reason... would be Maya-chan likes Kitamura-kun."

"..."

Ryuuji was so stiff that he no longer had any visible signs of life, and was close to becoming a statue.

"Other people... this time it's Noto-kun that taunted her, which is why they fought. And that's why, everyone couldn't help but say what they thought... Sigh... it is hard to resolve..."

Minori didn't notice the slowly petrifying Ryuuji, who was close to fainting. *I never thought she would talk so freely about other people's romantic feelings when she herself has rejected me already...! Though she doesn't know that I've just recently managed to struggle out of my zombie mode and had wanted to start things over.*

Without any precaution, she unconsciously moved her face over,

"Takasu-kun should be able to know. The reason why Noto-kun is getting in Maya-chan's way is because he's ' misunderstood' about Taiga liking Kitamura-kun, and wishing to help Taiga, decided to clash with Maya-chan... "

Minori's totally off-hand comment had lit up a flame within Ryuuji-- *Just what are you talking about!?* Though he knew this wasn't the main cause, he still felt he had to respond to Minori's comment for some reason. *You don't know anything! You're supposed to be Taiga's best friend, how could you still not know Taiga's true feelings?*

Anxiety rushed into Ryuuji's head,

"Maybe he didn't misunderstand,", Ryuuji's voice had suddenly become sharp, causing Minori to widen her eyes. "Even Kushieda couldn't know everything about Taiga, right? Even if she didn't tell you, perhaps she really does like Kitamura."

"... Impossible. As long as it concerns Taiga, I would know. There's nothing I wouldn't know about her."

Should we continue? Ryuuji had wanted to purposely mention about Taiga and Kitamura going to the shrine together during the New Year, but he decided to keep quiet about it. It would be meaningless even if he did mention it, since they didn't go together for the sake of letting people know. Besides, whether Minori knows about this or not wouldn't change anything.

Hence Ryuuji knew about it but Minori didn't, nor was she aware of her own ignorance.

"... Anyway, it's more complicated than you'd imagine. I too hope everyone could get together again."

"Complicated... maybe. Maybe it's more complicated than me or Takasu-kun would ever imagine."

Minori muttered and flickered her bangs, which seemed to get in her way. Only the hardly warm heater made any noise in this resting room, as Ryuuji was feeling a bit embarrassed to talk. Neither did Minori speak.

-- Both had something they didn't speak of.

Minori pretended the fact that she rejected Ryuuji never happened, neither did she want to touch upon that subject. And even if she didn't say anything, Ryuuji was certain he would be able to understand.

As for Ryuuji, he never did let go. He could hardly forget about it even if he wanted to, he even wanted to bring it up again, and ask where Minori's true feelings lie , it's just that he couldn't find the chance to.

The words he wanted to say were stuck in his throat, and so he had to resort to testing each other out.

We could still converse naturally a while ago, why can't I do it now?

"... What should we do?"

Minori quietly muttered, Ryuuji then realized why they couldn't communicate smoothly.

The fact was, an irremovable barrier existed between him and Minori.

Minori didn't seem to want to match Ryuuji's movements, if that were the case, then Ryuuji would

actively match her movements. In other words, to pretend she never dumped him, or the barrier would never be removed.

Yet now he couldn't pretend he could forget about it.

"I wish there's some magic spell, where we can get everyone to make up in an instant."

"Yeah..."

Like cogs that couldn't match each other, they were making noises of friction, which would sooner or later cause problems. Despite knowing that, Ryuuji still couldn't say anything.

If he didn't pretend together with Minori that "nothing ever happened", then the cogs between them would never be able to turn.

But that would amount to cheating themselves.

That's right--- nothing was ever smooth all along.

It was like that when he carried Taiga's bag together, speaking with each other through the window, being together in Taiga's kitchen, or skiing together earlier today--- and every time they smiled at each other, it was all the same.

Thinking their relationship was going smoothly, they were happy together, hoping this could all continue---

These thoughts were all results of Ryuuji deluding himself. Suppressing his thoughts to match Minori's movements, struggling and hoping that she too could change, yet this balance was disrupted by other people, just like when they were skiing together.

"Um... we must come up with something. This would be our last field trip, it'll be over in an instant... Damn, could this all end like this?"

Minori sighed, and slowly put her hand in her pocket and took something out, placing it on her obstructing bangs, and then...

"Where'd you get that?"

"Oh? This hair clip? Taiga gave it to me. She said it's a treasure and told me I must absolutely cherish it. Looks cute, right? Oh, I don't mean me, I mean this clip."

Minori smiled cheerfully as an orange glow emanated on her head. That was the very hair clip which Ryuuji chose. This meant that, when Ryuuji gave it to Haruta that day, Taiga rushed to grab it when their homeroom teacher arrived--- it ended up with Taiga.

"Haha..."

Ryuuji laughed, and covered his face and thought,

It's over.

I understand completely now. When he saw Minori putting on the hair clip, which represented his lingering hopes, he knew the cog was completely broken.

Forcefully trying to fit something which never fitted-- the result is, of course, malfunction.

Minori said she wanted things to remain the same and not change, hoping everyone would remain just as they were, and always remain like that.

In order to do that, in order to match Minori's thinking , Ryuuji must conceal the the origins of that hair clip, he must suppress this fact. He must suppress himself, and his own feelings.

He had to conform with Minori's world where nothing would ever happen, smile while saying "I'm fine even when I've got dumped", lie that he's already forgotten about it, as well as maintain the same expressions with Minori.

But I can no longer do that.

Because my feelings are alive just like I am, if I suppress both, blood will come out.

Thinking back, all this was just set up deliberately by Minori to prove that "everything's fine". Those feelings of touching each other, smiling with each other, all of them were deliberate. Even when looking for me now. All of them.

Everything came from thinking "it's nothing", "there's no big deal"--- This was all created by Minori. Ryuuji could only think like that now.

"Ahaha... is that so... so it's like that."

"... What's wrong, Takasu-kun? How come you're not saying anything? Hey, what's going on?"

"No! It doesn't matter anymore."

Ryuuji widened his eyes behind his hand which concealed his face.

I'm already broken, already bleeding, and can no longer withstand being deceived anymore."

The "business as usual" which Minori wished for was hurting Ryuuji's heart on a daily basis. Ryuuji knew very well if he didn't conform, he would not be able to maintain "business as usual". *Despite all that, she still chose to dump me on Christmas night, and still insisted on maintaining "business as usual".*

I'm arrogant and cunning-- Ryuuji finally understand what Minori meant when she said that.

This meant that "If you want to like me, then you have to accept my arrogance and cunning, and must obey my command to suppress yourself, and accept everything."

But why?

Why wouldn't she just come out and tell me "I hate you, and I don't want to go out with you"?

Ahh--- I get it, it's all to do with being arrogant and cunning, is it? Not having the courage to hurt people, is it? Yet what she's done has merely caused an even greater injury.

"Takasu-kun... Takasu-kun! What's wrong? Is something the matter? I'm sorry, was it something I said? "

"No, I'm fine, it's nothing." Ryuuji lifted his head and smiled as he stepped slowly away from the sofa, pulling a distance between himself and Minori. "Where are you going?" He didn't even respond to Minori's question as he turned and left.

Everyone should still be at the restaurant, right? The smile still remained on Ryuuji's face as he speedily walked along the corridor back to the noisy restaurant and to his table.

"I'm having stomach troubles, so I'm going back to my room for now. Now where's the key..."

"Takasu..."

He was aware Kitamura was looking at him with a stunned expression, he also knew Noto and Haruta was looking at him quietly.

Yet he said nothing, and grabbed the keys as he left the restaurant.

* * *

Before, Ryuuji had believed that the most sorrowful night of his life would have have been that night on Christmas. But never did he think that this record would be rewritten so soon.

Returning alone to the dusty and dark Japanese-style room, he quickly took out the futon which was folded at the corner and unfolded it without even tidying its corners before placing the pillow and blanket on top of it. Without even taking a bath, he crawled straight into the futon in his casual wear. *At least for this hour... no even thirty minutes will do, just let me be alone.* Ryuuji hoped that no one would come into this room.

On that Christmas night, he at least had a home to return to, and a bed to crawl in. His mind then went blank as a result of catching a flu afterwards, his memories became as blurry as a dream -- *Probably something to do with the fever.*

Yet everything right before him was reality, an incontrovertible reality was being played out before his very eyes, and impressed within his brain.

Kushieda Minori will never accept my feelings. She's already made her decision, and this is the reality that cannot be overruled. She wanted to end my unrequited love by pretending "nothing's ever happened". She never did, and never intended to stop her cogs from moving. I don't know why she made that decision, and I don't know when she made it. In any case, Minori will never accept my feelings, or even acknowledge that it ever exists in this world. When she said there were no ghosts in this world, and that those UFOs were probably my imagination, which meant that all my devoted love towards her had been a mistake --- that's what it all is.

That's all.

But why?

Why?

Clutching his pillow, Ryuuji bent his body, forcefully closing his eyes and biting his lips, his heart hoping, *Please, don't let anybody come in.* But at this moment the door slided open. *KERAK!*

"Takasu, what's wrong? Did something happen?"

"You asleep? We were worried about you."

"Are you really having stomach problems~~? Don't tell me you're secretly keeping some food for yourself~~? "

His wish was brutally rejected by the heavens. The three footsteps mercilessly came besides his futon.

You are kidding me... Sorry to say this, but this *is* reality.

Ryuuji was grateful for their friendship, but right now all he wanted was for them to leave him alone. He pretended he didn't hear them, and hid under his blanket pretending to sleep. "Hello~ Hello~~" ... Haruta's finger was aiming right for his butt. *If I had really had diarrhea and went to sleep now, wouldn't poking me there make things*

rather disastrous? "Hmm~? He's really sleeping!" Unable to read the situation, Haruta began tugging at the blanket , and Ryuuji too grabbed the blanket edge and resisted.

"...!"

"Heh! Are you really asleep~?"

Too much resistance would merely arouse more suspicion... And so Ryuuji allowed Haruta to tug the blanket away. He could feel the idiot approach with his gross breathe, and struggled to cuddle himself with his eyes closed.

This action is obviously telling you guys that I'm feeling rather unwell, and need to be alone. Ryuuji hoped they could smell his "leave me alone" scent he emitted.

"... He really is sleeping~ Can't be helped!~ Let's leave him alone!"

Yes, that's it. Sorry, Haruta; sorry, everyone. Yet just when Ryuuji sighed a breath of relief, the next second Noto screamed something very shocking,

"H, hey! Kitamura! What do you think you're doing!? Why the hell are you taking off your clothes!?"

Ryuuji's eyelids twitched an instant. *No way, man.* He had a very bad premonition about this, and couldn't help but hold his breath.

"Takasu's asleep, I guess I should sleep as well."

"WHOA~~! Why are you only naked in the bottom half!? You exhibitionist... I can see your member!"

"I'm fine just wearing like this on top. Now where's my bag~~?"

"Ahhhh~~! That thing's dangling~~!"

"Hurry up and hide that Johnny of yours!"

Kitamura... your bag's under the cupboard! Ryuuji desperately tried to communicate telepathically, but it seemed Kitamura totally didn't receive anything. Just hearing Kitamura walking idly around was scary enough , yet what's more scary was his footsteps had arrived right above his ahead. *He's not thinking of walking over my head, is he?* A terrifying image flashed by Ryuuji's mind...

"Oh... my, I feel some incredible gas is coming out of my ass..."

"He's gonna spray it out directly!? Without any filter whatsoever!"

"Ugh~~! Disgusting~~! Poor Taka-chan, poor guy~~!"

No. Way.

You're kidding me, you're kidding me, you're kidding me, no friggin way! Stop it, stop it, STOP IT--- "POOH!"

"YOU... BASTARD~~! How dare you spray such unhygienic gases full of toxins and bacteria *ON MY FACE---* Eh!?"

Ryuuji finally got up.

"... Gotcha."

"... You really believed."

"... You actually believed~~"

The three idiots looked at each other. Kitamura was wearing his tracksuit while standing above Ryuuji's head , his arms crossed to simulate the sound of flatulence.

"Why. You. Bastard..."

For five whole seconds, Ryuuji could only stand stunned and motionless at the same spot.

"... WHOOOAAA!!! Do you know how much terror I had to endure just now!?"

"Sorry about that. But we were worried about you, you seemed strange."

Kitamura's eyes behind his glasses looked quite serious. Wrapping his head, Ryuuji felt troubled. *You're the ones who were acting strangely!* Though he wanted to say that, but he couldn't being himself to.

"Well? What's the matter anyway?"

Noto said as he widened the eyes behind his glasses, which were far smaller than Kitamura's (though he hardly looked cute at all). Even Haruta spoke,

"My feet's cold~ Can I stick them in~?"

And treated Ryuuji's blanket as if it were a kotatsu.

"... It's nothing... really."

"Then how come you're returning to sleep on your own? Takasu, weren't you worried about me last time and listened to my troubles? This time let me listen to yours, let me return the favour. We're really worried about you, so please tell us."

Kitamura sat upright on the tatami and approached Ryuuji. Ryuuji understood how Kitamura felt when he said that, because back when Kitamura dyed his hair blond, Ryuuji too was very worried for him.

But doesn't Kitamura also have things that he couldn't say? Ryuuji couldn't help but think.

"... Alright? Please tell us."

... Ryuuji quickly felt ashamed for thinking only for himself.

He lifted his eyes so that they met with Kitamura's, as well as Noto's and Haruta's.

These people are my true friends.

They're my irreplaceable mates.

I should believe my mates, if my mates have something they're unwilling to say, then I should believe he has his reasons for not saying.

He raised his arms-- Ryuuji had subconsciously raised his arms. *It's an unconditional surrender. You win.*

"... I've never said this before all this time..."

Those that concede defeat must give way, that is the rule of men.

Ryuuji scratched his head after hesitating for some time, and then--

"I've always, l, like, liked..."

He finally managed to squeeze the sound out of his throat. Upon hearing up to this point, even Haruta was sitting upright, while Noto and Kitamura were already longing for the answer.

"K, Kushieda..."

"...!?"

"Uh...!"

"Go on!"

"I got dumped that night in Christmas..."

"Oh...!"

"...Uh!"

"... Go on!"

"And just now, we were still, talking over there... and then it's all over..."

"Whoa..."

"Uh-huh..."

"Come on, continue!"

"I said it's over!"

Banzai! Ryuuji raised his arms. *Yeah right!* And was once again worn out, all the energy in his body used up in one breath, and his mind became blank once again, like ash which had been completely burnt up. If there was wind, the ashes might even fade away into dust.

No one said anything.

No one said anything. Kitamura took a peek at Noto, who sheepishly looked towards Haruta, who slowly looked back at Ryuuji.

...

"WHOOOOOOAAAAAAA-----!!!!!!"

All hell broke loose.

The four of them went howling like idiots. "YAAAH!" "UWAAAH!" "WHOOOOA!" "ARRGGHHH!" They shoved each other, smacked themselves on the bedsheets , rolled all over, and scratched the tatami, bouncing about like shrimps.

"When did it happen!? Kushieda... you mean *that* Kushieda!?"

"Hey, how did it come to this? Why, why, why why why!?"

"Kushieda!? *Kushieda!?* It can't be... *that* Kushieda!? Are you kidding~~!?"

"Yes!" Ryuuji nodded,

"That's right! It's Kushieda Minori! I'm sorry, but I've been secretly in love with that strange girl for over a year ! But she doesn't even think anything of me! She didn't believe me! She denied me! Denied my feelings...! WHYYYY!!!???"

Ryuuji fell heavily onto the futon. *It won't matter anymore if I suck in any fleas! Neither would it matter if I get an allergic reaction! Go ahead, cry! Right now, it doesn't matter if they see how pathetic I look! It's too late to hide it from them anymore!*

"But... I thought you get along well with Kushieda? I remember seeing you guys chat casually a number of times."

"Me too!" Hearing Noto, even Haruta, who was known to have a terrible memory, nodded in agreement. *This hardly counts as consolation, you know?* Ryuuji felt like retorting what they said.

"Why did Kushieda reject you? For what reason? I can't accept this result! Absolutely not! I never heard

about her having any boyfriend or secretly falling in love with anyone! But a guy that Kushieda likes... doesn't seem to exist!? Just why is that?"

"The hell should I know!? Why don't you go ask her!?"

Ryuuji just felt like pissing off right now when he answered that. At this moment, Kitamura stood up,

"Alright, let's go ask her."

"Wha!?" Ryuuji looked at his face.

"I too cannot accept this result. If I were a girl, I would go out with Takasu."

"Me too, me too!" "And me, and me!" Both Noto and Haruta yelled as well. Kitamura certainly looked serious as he pushed up his glasses with his middle finger. There didn't seem to be any hesitation within.

"Whaa---t!? Stop fooling around!"

"Yeah, while it sounds like going to ask Kushieda about Takasu's stuff, it's more like wanting to say something to the girls."

"If that's the case, you should go on your own! D, don't drag me into this!"

Kitamura placed his hand on the shoulder on Ryuuji, who was painfully struggling, and with a wise-looking face spoke his usual nonsense,

"Takasu, rather than sleeping here, why not face Kushieda and those girls head on? There's too many things happening today, my brain's about to explode, we should settle this with the girls once and for all! Fighting's not going to do us any good! Understanding each other is the first step towards a harmonious society! After all, there're only men and women in this world!"

"Don't give me this bullshit! Doesn't it sound strange to you!? Don't drag me into this! Please!"

Ryuuji moved his arms about, trying to stop Kitamura's crazy plan--

"Takasu, I too have something I want to say to the girls . So let's go together. I remember the girls' room is downstairs."

"Taka-chan! This is to avenge Taka-chan! Our precious Taka-chi... I mean Taka-chan! How dare she dump our precious Taka-chan, I'll never forgive that Kushieda~~!"

"Alright, let's go, right now!"

"Let's go, everybody! Takasu's coming as well!"

"Take this~~ Take that~~ Damn you Kushieda~~!"

Ryuuji grabbed the fired up Kitamura, attempting to stop him,

"Don't go, don't go, don't go! I said don't go! Can we all sit down!? Please!?"

"Noto, bring the keys! We're moving!"

Ryuuji's hand got yanked out of the futon by Kitamura . "W, w, wait a minute, are you guys serious!?" Everyone nodded their heads,

"Takasu, this is now the Chuushingura play. You're the tragic daimyo of Ako, Asano Naganori, and we're his Forty-seven Ronin out to avenge his death."

"That's just using me as an excuse!"

"That's right, Kushieda would be the treacherous Kira. Though we're just gentlemen, and would only seek to have a talk with the girls. Alright, the room is now locked."

"How can this be just a talk!? It'll definitely turn into a brawl!"

"Oh~~ Kira is cool~~ I've collected the whole set~~! Though the story's a bit hard to understand~~! I should cut my hair to resemble him~~ But wouldn't it be a bit embarrassing to bring a manga to the hairdressers?"

"Your Kira is completely different than our Kira!"

While Haruta showed his usual idiotic face, Kitamura and Noto had already left the room, and Haruta had to follow quickly.

"Damn it! I... I, I, I don't care anymore! Suit yourselves!
"

Ryuuji was close to crying, yet was still worried that without him, the Chuushingura play could not be performed, and so had no choice but to dash after his friends.

* * *

"Alright, you girls! We've come to seek revenge! Hurry up and open the door or else... Huh? Hey, it's open!"

Kitamura turned the inexpensive door handle and it instantly opened, startling him a bit as he quickly turned to look at everyone else. "Okay, everybody, show's over," Just as Ryuuji was about to close the door again...

"How lucky~~ Heh heh. You damn girls~~ Don't tell me they're really closet exhibitionists by purposely not locking the door while changing..."

"Let's go! Kitamura, Takasu!"

Without hesitation, Haruta pulled the door open and charged into the room, followed by Noto as he pushed Kitamura in and pulled Ryuuji's hand. As the four of them ran into the girls' room, Ryuuji found himself completely stiff as he prepared for the terrifying screams that would follow. But...

"Hey! There's no one in here!"

"Really... that's too sloppy of them. By the way, what's this?"

Ryuuji inspected the six square meter room, and frowned like a possessed old hag. *Is this really the same type of room as ours?*

The luggage of the five girls were randomly placed everywhere --- the bags which were zipped up were still fine, but for those which were unzipped, their contents were overflowing. On the floor one could see toothbrushes, hairdryers, decorated cellphones, tiny bags , magazines, and all sorts of ladies' accessories. The skiing costumes were simply thrown aside, and only two coats and four skirts were hung properly in the closet.

Finally, there was a single sock by the wall. What Ryuuji couldn't stand most was odd socks lying around without their partners.

"How can someone be so messy...! ARRGGHH...!!!"

"Restrain yourself, Takasu! Now's not the time for that!"

Kitamura held onto Ryuuji's shoulder to stop him, while Ryuuji was shivering all over. Incidently, under Ryuuji's supervision, everyone in the boys' room had their bags inside the closet, properly hung their uniform inside, while their skiing costumes were hung by the window to dry after squeezing excess wetness off. Besides, he even mandated that everyone must place their own belongings back in their bags after using them.

All this because if four or five high school students can't even stay tidy in a six square-metered space, then there's no way to maintain a comfortable space for each person. Besides, stuff lying around would simply attract more stuff, if someone threw something, the mess will gradually accumulate. A messy environment would lead

to a messy state of mind for those living in it. *Our moods would be worse off if we live in such a chaotic and narrow space.*

Yet I never thought... Though it's only for three days and two nights, don't these girls want to sleep a bit more comfortable? At least they should tidy up their uniform and skiing costumes! The costumes can get smelly, while the uniform skirts can get roughed up... Argh, I musn't! Ryuuji bit his lips, trying his best not to make himself tidy things up.

"The door's not even locked, and they left the room like this... They must be thinking that the door locks itself and went somewhere else to play, right? Or have they gone to take a bath? By the way, just how much snack have they brought anyway?"

As Noto looked absent-mindedly at the carnage in the room, he suddenly yelled, "WHOA!"

"What's up~~ Noto-chan~?"

"I saw it! A blue camisole top!"

"I found a wet towel~~! Yay---!"

Noto and Haruta lifted the treasures they found and blinked at each other while praising their spirit of adventure. As the conscience of Class 2-C, Kitamura warned them,

"Hey, stop this at once! How could you... Takasu, you stop this as well!"

"Ugh... T, this is not what you think it is!"

Ryuuji quickly hid someone's sock behind his back.

"Seriously, even Takasu's like that... Stop messing with other people's private belongings! Alright everyone, put them back where you found them! Whoa, what did I just step on? What's this... Essence lotion? Hmm... I wonder if this is hand cream or facial cream? Hmm-- smells of herbal essence."

"Lemme see, wow..."

"It's essence!"

"Oh boy~ Just smelling it feels naughty enough, heh heh."

Kitamura squeezed some of the lotion from the tube onto the back of its palm, and everyone came forward to smell it. Rubbing it, Kitamura said, "Wow, it's smooth." --- That completely didn't sound anything like the conscience of Class 2-C.

"... Eh heh heh!"

Haruta suddenly laughed,

"You know, we look completely like perverts, don't we ? We'll get caught like this, right?"

"What are you talking about? We're here to exact revenge. At least our objective's normal."

That's right. Hearing Noto's reply, both Ryuuji and Kitamura nodded in agreement.

"But this really looks bad on us right now!"

Now that they thought about it... They realized they do look suspicious just by appearance alone.

Haruta hung someone's used towel on his neck, Noto was holding someone's camisole top, Ryuuji had stole a

single piece of sock, while Kitamura was rubbing lotion on his hand, as well as indulging in its smell.

Kitamura rubbed his hand softly and said,

"... We do look suspicious now, but we're no perverts out to loot girls' belongings. Though we may look like perverts right now, but if we place back the girls' belongings where they belong before the girls come back, and then re-invade again, then everything will be alright. What do you guys think?"

It was a perfect speech. Everyone seemed to agree, but at this moment...

Click! Within the room where the perverts were creating a scene for the girls' belongings, the sound of the door handle opening could be heard.

* * *

Of all the people to come in, it had to be Taiga.

In nothing flat, everyone rushed into the closet, their hearts beating like mad. Of all the girls, Taiga was the fiercest, as well as the hardest to communicate with.

From a tiny gap within the closet door, they could see what's happening outside.

"We're doomed..."

SHHH! Ryuuji stopped Noto from his wailing, but even he was feeling despair to the point of pissing his own pants. By entering the closet, everyone had by default become perverts... Massive perverts. This was far worse than getting excited over the girls' private belongings in an empty room. They now no longer had any proper excuse to call this a righteous invasion. *We don't even have that right!*

Ryuuji gulped, for right now they could only hide and observe. Taiga didn't seem to notice Ryuuji & Co were watching her as she tossed the key onto the tatami, she didn't even notice that the door was unlocked to begin with.

Looks like she just came back from the bath.

Wearing a hooded T-shirt and trousers, she hung her long, wet hair over. With a reddened face, she sighed and dried her hair with the towel on her shoulders, and then picked up the hairdryer which was left in the middle of the room, holding the cord while looking around. She seemed to be looking for the socket.

The socket was right ahead on the wall where Taiga was standing, yet Taiga drooped her shoulders disappointedly and said,

"There's none..."

Ryuuji slid from the futon he was sitting on, if he hadn't landed on Noto's foot, he would have already made a sound.

"Takasu...!"

"Sorry...!"

He apologized with a voice even softer than breathing. *It's all Taiga's fault for being so stupid, I can't believe she just tossed the hair dryer away without even noticing the socket's right in front of her.* Just as Ryuuji was wondering how Taiga was going to deal with her wet hair, as though remembering something, she walked in great strides

towards the refridgerator and took out the bottled tea she bought earlier.

Taiga stood while opening the lid. After taking a bath, she decided to place a hand on her hip and drink the whole bottle in one gulp just like that.

"... Cough!"

And got choked as a result.

The tea came out of her mouth as a result of her coughing. Taiga took a look and merely said,

"Oh man."

Now's not the time to be saying this! ... The person inside the closet was feeling annoyed as well. Ryuuji gritted his teeth as he saw the puddle of tea on the tatami, *If you don't wipe that off quickly, it'll leave a stain on the tatami!*

Did Taiga received Ryuuji's telephatic signals? For she quickly took the towel she used to dry her hair and began to bend down to wipe the stains. *Then what are you gonna use to dry your hair with?* Right before a worried Ryuuji, Taiga quickly answered his question: By wiping her hair with the same towel.

"Ehhh...!?" Even Haruta was exclaiming, while Ryuuji was on the verge of going ballistic. *Unbelievable! Absolutely unbelievable! AHH~ Taiga, how can you be so absent minded like that?* Ryuuji then looked at Taiga's cheeks as she drank her tea again. *She's like a doll, as cute as a princess from a fairy tale story, but yet...* "HIC!" *Can I please beg you to not do that? And don't hiccup as well!*

Placing the cap back on the bottle, Taiga wandered about the room again, while using the towel she just used to wipe the tea stain to dry her hair.

"Wah!"

And got tripped by someone's luggage, landing flat on her face. By simply doing that, she had made everyone inside the closet react in someway, such was her ability.

"Oww..."

The half empty bottle which was in her hand had ended up landing on her head. "...!" "Ugh...!" The boys had to cover their mouths to restrain their laughs while twitching their bodies uncontrollably, for they had seen the Goddess of Clumsiness. Yet for Taiga, that amount of clumsiness was business as usual.

"Ah... what the hell... Ahh..."

Taiga rubbed her head while looking releaxed, she rolled herself over and lied down on the tatami with her arms and legs outstretched while yawning. She twisted her waist while humming a song with her eyes closed, " Chirpity~ Chirp~" --- The song was nothing but mimicking of cicadas. *Oh man, I can't take it anymore.*

"...PFT HA!"

"!?"

The culprit was Ryuuji.

Tension gripped the closet as the other three banged their fists silently onto Ryuuji's back, but it was too late to retrieve the voice. Taiga quickly noticed something was wrong and got up as agile as a cat while grabbing the bottle in her hand. Terror appeared in expression, her face was pale as though wearing a mask, only her eyes which suppress any emotion glimmered, widening as much as they could. She scanned everywhere in the room with her eyes, and after going one round, and stopped in front of the closet as though suddenly discovering something.

Taiga held the bottle on her right hand, while shielding her face with her left, and walked slowly towards the closet. At this moment, something unexpected happened...

--- "Don't think Taiga would lock the door before sleeping, would she?"

--- "It's possible, it does seem like something she'd do."

"Ahahahaha..." The laughter of four girls could be heard, as well as Maya and Ami talking. The voices of the girls in the corridor had transmitted through the hotel's thin walls and into the closet. The voices were getting nearer, and they were about to enter the room, while in front of them Taiga was about to open the closet door.

"Shh! Don't make a sound!"

I was the one who accidentally laughed, so I should take responsibility. Praying to the heavens, Ryuuji opened the closet door quicker than Taiga did.

"Eeeeeeeeeek~~~ Eeeeek....!"

When a person encounters something truly terrifying, they may actually be unable to make any sound at all. And so Taiga screeched like a little monkey, her eyes going white while her legs kneeled in paralysis before Ryuuji, who suddenly appeared before her. Even when she knew everyone in the closet, this reaction was expected upon seeing a bunch of perverts appear inside, with one of them even leaping out attempting to drag her in.

"Please please please don't make a sound! I'm very very very sorry about this! Please forgive me!"

"R, R, R, R, Ryuuji f, f, f, from the c, c, c, closet...!?"

With a face of a demon-possessed old hag, Ryuuji not only knelt to apologize, he also grabbed onto Taiga's stiff hand and dragged her into the bottom compartment of the closet. Just before Taiga passed out, Ryuuji was explaining like a husband who just got caught commiting adultery, "I'll explain everything to you afterwards." At the nick of moment...

"Huh? The door's unlocked. Hey, Taiga! How can you be so careless...?"

The door clicked open, and the voices of Maya and the others trickled into the room. Kitamura had softly closed the closet door at just about the same moment.

"HE..."

...LP! That's all Taiga could say.

"This is all I ask of you... for all my life... so please..."

Ryuuji had become a true pervert, softly whispering besides Taiga's ears while locking Taiga's body up with his own. He could sense Taiga has indeed just taken a bath, as he could feel her body warmth transmitting through her hooded T-shirt and trousers.

As Taiga was a girl after all, this sort of behaviour alone was really going to get him arrested, not to mention Ryuuji was muffling Taiga's mouth. She tried to bite his hand with her beastly jaws, yet Ryuuji simply resisted yelling from the pain. The wet head of hair struggled beneath Ryuuji's chin. *Knock!* He could feel her head bumping into his. Even so, Ryuuji didn't make a sound. *Can't make the same mistake again.* Ryuuji then realized how tiny was the hand he held, how slim the body he was grabbing onto, for a while, he was worried whether he was exerting too much force on her. But was

relieved when the amount of force that kept banging onto his jaw was as strong as ever. A feeling that was slightly different from guilt was scattered along with the pain.

"Huh? Taiga's not here... Didn't she say she's coming back first to dry her hair?"

"The key's over there. Could she have gone to the bathroom? Ahh... that sure was a nice bath...! Though it was no hot spring, it sure feels nice to dip in such a huge bath."

"Me too. I feel like taking another dip afterwards. We can dip as many times we like before lights go out, right? "

"Nanako-chan, you sure do like your baths. If you're going, count me in as well. I can lose weight that way. By the way, Ami-chan, are you sure you don't want to do a photo-special? I'm sure that'll create a lot of headlines!"

"Really~? But I'm not interested in becoming a celebrity~"

Returning to their room, Minori, Ami, Maya and Nanako began to chat amongst themselves, using each

other's perfumes, eating their snacks and watching television. Everyone was doing their own thing, but no one seemed to notice the sexual harrassment that was going on inside the closet. Ryuuji's strength alone was never going to be enough to restrain the berserked Palmtop Tiger.

Things will be bad if Taiga ever escapes. Is it only a matter of time when things get exposed? Just when Ryuuji thought about that...

"... I just thought of something. Could Taiga have gone alone to the boys room? To look for Maruo?"

With a towel over her long hair, Maya asked while sitting roughly over the tatami. Upon hearing her name, Taiga twitched for a moment. So too did Kitamura in the upper compartment of the closet.

Sitting opposite Maya and applying her facial lotion (the one Kitamura smeared on his hand a while ago), Nanako smiled and said,

"Taiga going alone to the boys room? How could that be possible? You think too much."

"Oh, it could be that she went to do something with Takasu-kun, only for Yuusaku to appear... That's possible as well, wouldn't it?"

"What do you mean by 'doing something'?" Nanako asked puzzlingly. Ryuuji was feeling the same way, *What do you mean 'doing something' anyway!?* This, while Takasu-kun is holding Taiga imprisoned within the closet!

"Eh---!? If that happens, I wouldn't like that! By the way, just what's going on with Taiga lately? Is she really going after Maruo? After all this talk, doesn't she get along best with Takasu-kun? A while before when we went to her place, Takasu-kun was even cleaning the dishes! This means he goes to her place all the time, right ? Could it be that we've merely misunderstood about her liking Maruo, and she's actually going out with Takasu-kun? That would be great if that's true!"

... Taiga, who had been resisting all this time, stopped moving suddenly. With things as they were right now, not even Taiga would find it convenient to get out. Ryuuji decided to loosen his grip as a result, and Taiga didn't barge out of the closet yelling, "I've been in here all

the time!" From the light that shone through the gap into the closet, Taiga held her breath with a stiff face and took a quick glance at Ryuuji, as though telling him, "I'll remember you for this!"

"Kushieda-san, what do you think? You get along best with Taiga, so you should know, right? Does Taiga like Maruo or Takasu-kun? It's Takasu-kun, right?"

"Oh my, even if you were to ask me, I wouldn't know how to answer. Why don't we wait till Taiga returns?"

Minori was using hair clips to hold onto her cleaned hair as she tilted her head to answer.

"Eh~~!? How could Taiga possibly tell us!? By the way , you've been quiet since the beginning... Is something wrong?"

"Really? Maybe I'm too exhausted from all the skiing. I've been feeling like sleeping for some time now."

"Eh~~ We can't let you sleep yet~! We're gonna have a good girl's talk tonight! Let me ask you, if Takasu-kun and Taiga were to end up together, wouldn't you have any opinion on that?"

"Minorin would go 'ow ow ow~' and then say nothing ~"

"HA!" Ami made an enigmatic laugh, instantly freezing the atmosphere in the room, as well as the air in the lower compartment of the closet.

"Huh? What is it? What does Ami-chan mean by that? Tell us please! You want to know as well, right, Nanako-chan?"

"Well, of course I do. Come to think of it, for some time Ami-chan has been saying stuff that only Kushieda-san can understand."

"Oh my, I didn't know even you two could figure that out~~? Minori-chan, I'm sorry, but since you were acting dumb, Ami-chan couldn't help but to say something about it."

Minori kept quiet, and only looked at Ami's face. Blinking her usual chihuahua eyes, Ami purposely displayed a cute smile and looked back at Minori.

"Hey, stop communicating with your eyes and say something! Ami-chan!"

"... So Maya-chan says. Minori-chan, what do you plan to do? Want me to say~~?"

As Ami tilted her head, Minori finally spoke,

"... Say what?"

Ryuuji gulped. Just the subject alone was chilling enough, yet what was scarier was Minori's expression - her eyes were slightly squinted as she lifted her chin to look into Ami's face. He had seen such an expression before, and he never did forget it. It was back during rehearsal for the school festival, when she was asking about Taiga's father. This expression meant she was really angry.

Though Ami didn't yield, and even revealed a relaxed smile, like the Queen of Mischief revealing her true powers, her beautiful face announced,

"About how Minori-chan had turned down Takasu-kun's confession during Christmas night! Or have you forgotten about it already? Oh my~ As expected from the popular girl being sought after~! How cool~! How awesome~! So those getting dumped aren't worthy of being remembered~! Ahaha!"

"Huh? Wha? EHHHHHHH!? W, w, what happened!? Takasu-kun confessed to you!? Is that true!?"

"And you rejected him!? On Christmas night!? No way ! How come Ami-chan knows about this!?"

"Hmm~ I wonder how~~ It really is incredible~"

Ignoring the excited Maya and Nanako, Minori sighed and coldly said,

"...Amin, why are you mentioning this...?"

Hearing this question, Ami's response was:

"Because you've always been playing dumb. I think you. Are. Truly. Amazing. You can just pretend as though nothing had happened, say whatever it suits you just to get through the occasion."

Ami's words were so direct it was scary, and her harsh tone sounded as though she was about to pick a fight with Minori.

"The person who Takasu-kun liked wasn't Taiga, it was you, wasn't it? But you rejected him, and now you pretend you don't remember a thing, acting all dumb and

saying stuff like 'Let's get along together!' Or "I hope everything remains the same as always!'... You really know how to talk! Do you realize how scary you sound? A girl telling the guy she just dumped to get along well with her! Act as though everything's the same as before! How do you expect him to take it!? It was the same during the skiing session, purposely getting close to him, as though intending to tell everyone how dense you are. Do you realize the consequences of your unconscious actions? Do you even know how cruel that is?"

The people inside the closet and the girls in the room all held their breath. Neither the main actors nor the bystanders could say anything.

"... Just when did you notice that I didn't care!? Did you see it? What do you understand about me anyway!? Can you read my mind!? Moreover, this has nothing to do with you! You stay out of this!"

Only Minori spoke.

"Because it's got nothing to do with me, is it? Ah... I get it, I'm sorry. But when I heard you'd rejected Takasu-kun , my thoughts were 'Was it because of guilt?' Turns out it had nothing to do with me."

"I already said it's got nothing do with you, and I don't get what you just meant. If you believe that I don't seem to care, suit yourself, and leave me alone."

"I would if it had nothing to do with me~ Then it'll have nothing to do with guilt. Oh my, and I thought you always liked Takasu-kun, but decided to turn him down only because you felt guilty... for someone... But it turns out it's simply because you hate Takasu-kun that you rejected him~. Then how about Ami-chan go tell Takasu-kun tomorrow that 'The reason Minori-chan rejected you was because she hates you'? Rather than drag on like this, don't you think it's more merciful to end this decisively sooner rather than later?"

"... Do whatever you want."

"OK! Roger that! Oh, how about I do it now?"

"... I already said suit youself."

"... You really know how to act like a goody-goody."

"... What's that supposed to mean!?"

"... I wonder, what was that supposed to mean?"

"Enough! Stop it!" Maya decided to risk herself and intervened between the two of them. The time that had froze had finally began to move once again.

"Ami-chan, what's with you anyway!? Don't do this, we're in the middle of a hard-to-come-by school trip! I take back everything I said! The one who pisses me off is Noto-kun! That's it! Kushieda-san, can you stop this as well? I beg you!"

Sitting besides Minori, Nanako too spoke,

"When Taiga returns later and finds you two fighting, she's going to feel bad. Her parents are divorced, you know. Coming from a single-parent family, I know how it feels like to be reminded of my parents bickering when I see people arguing with each other. So... Ami-chan, you've gone too far this time, please apologize and put an end to this."

Ami went silent for a while, and finally apologized,

"... I'm sorry Minori-chan, looks like I went too far, can we forget we ever said this?"

Ami lowered her head. Minori looked at her, and clapped her hands hardly,

"Right! That makes us even! Okay, I've forgotten about it!"

The tense atmosphere had finally relaxed.

"By the way, where has Taiga gone to? Why don't we go look for her, as well as have a change in mood?", Maya purposely proposed in a cheery tone. Hoping to change the mood quickly, the girls quickly nodded and left the room.

Creak The closet door opened.

"... I think we just saw something we weren't meant to see..."

First to come out was Kitamura. Noto and Haruta followed as well.

"How should I say this, Kushieda... Yikes, I'm just glad I didn't ask her any weird questions..."

"The thing is I completely don't understand what they were arguing about! Was I the only one? What does Ami-chan had to do with all this? Hey, Taka-chan, do you know why...?"

"T... that's what I want to know as well! What the hell... everyone's like that..."

Ryuuji's thoughts were thrown into chaos as he crawled out from the lower compartment of the closet.

"... Why you... miserable... BASTAAAARRRRDD---!!!"

Flicking her long, wet hair away, whether it was from her getting pissed off or something else, Taiga's face was completely red as she stood while breathing heavily. *Oh boy.* Ryuuji was prepared for what the Palmtop Tiger was about to do, and quickly closed his eyes.

"Grit your teeth hard, bastard!"

As he awaited Taiga to give him a big slap... "Wah..!" Taiga's right hand somehow missed, and she ended up falling on the tatami. She embarrassingly covered her reddened face,

"This is ridiculous! Just what the hell was going on... and why must I get dragged into all of this!? You guys can still go back to your own room! But what about me!? I have to spend two more nights with them, pretending as though I don't know anything! I have to play dumb with Minorin and Bakachi acting like that...!"

"You're right~ You poor thing~"

"Shut up, you hairy idiot! But, just what was going on... why were Minorin and Bakachi fighting? Was it because I didn't tell Bakachi anything...?

No one present dared answer Taiga's question. The boys were now exchanging awkward glances with each other after seeing a girls' fight they weren't supposed to see.

"Anyway..."

Kitamura said softly as his glasses slid down his nose,

"Anyway, we didn't see anything. Aisaka, when you were returning to the room, you saw Takasu, and ended up chatting with him, and so you found everyone had left the room by the time you came back... You okay with this story?"

Seeing Kitamura looking at her, though her face was still red, Taiga still nodded. Kitamura looked at Taiga and placed his hand on his forehead while saying to himself, "This is all my fault for getting too carried away. " Ryuuji had no idea what he meant by that, though as it didn't seem to be referring to him, he decided not to say anything.

Next thing was leaving the room, and so the perverts of the closet safely escaped, while Taiga had to remain alone in the girls room, pretending nothing had happened for two more nights. She was still full of rage as she said towards the group of perverts about to return to their room,

"... By the way, what were you guys doing here...?"

Chapter 6

Unlike the fine weather yesterday, the morning sky was covered with dark clouds.

The weather report even said there could be a blizzard in the morning. Although there's no wind right now, it has already begun to snow on the skiing track.

"Is your hand still alright, Takasu?"

Hearing Kitamura asking, Ryuuji turned his head and waved his gloved right hand,

"It's fine, it's just a little numb."

Ryuuji's hand was scalded this morning --- by that one-in-a-million clumsy idiot. It was during breakfast in the restaurant, when Ryuuji saw Taiga who had just got up and was about to fill her bowl with miso soup. He approached her from behind and asked softly, "So how'd it go?" As the girls were still generally ignoring the boys, Ryuuji had to tread carefully and not try to openly converse with Taiga, which led to him getting scalded as a result.

"Ow!" Taiga had purposely spilled the bowl full of miso soup onto Ryuuji's hand, but Ryuuji was only trying to ask how Taiga's play acting went the previous night.

"... I've more or less accepted this fate. I must remind myself never to approach Taiga when she's holding something dangerous in her hands."

"It was an accident, let her off this time."

"Taiga said something similar... something like 'Oh! What a coincidence! It was an accident! Such a pity!' ... Everything except an apology, that is."

"Probably had something to do with what happened last night."

Just let it go. Kitamura motioned as he waved his hand. *Of course.* Ryuuji responded by raising his eyebrow.

Students were given freedom to do whatever they want to in the morning.

And so there were students cheerfully playing around everywhere. Some tripped, some were leisurely building

snowmen. Noto and Haruta had brought their skis and rode the ski lift towards heights that suited their skiing abilities.

"No need to tag along with me, just do your own skiing."

"But my plan today was to teach you how to do a V-shape deceleration."

Though Kitamura offered so, Ryuuji still turned him down. Ryuuji knew Kitamura would not be able to ski all he wanted if he was taking care of him. Besides, with Kitamura being an easily fired-up instructor, Ryuuji wanted to stay away from his madness.

"I haven't got any talent anyway, and it seemed like Taiga's over there with her sled, I think I'll go spend time with her."

Ryuuji raised his hand and parted ways with Kitamura, who was headed to the ski lift, and walked down towards the gently-sloped ski track.

Whether Taiga was alone or not was secondary, for Ryuuji wanted some time alone to do some thinking. His mind was still quite chaotic till now, and was not suited for him to go skiing with his friends.

Ryuuji trudged forward in the snow with his boots. The temperature was lower than yesterday's, and he could feel his face ripping apart. He planned to walk towards the wooden hut beside the hill, being careful not to trip.

Ryuuji no longer cared about asking about Minori's true feelings, he didn't even care what "true feelings" actually meant. There seemed to be a hole in his heart, with something constantly falling above him. It was already painful enough for him to lose the most important part, so there was simply no room for him to do any forgiving.

Ryuuji sighed and rubbed his eyes. He hardly had any sleep last night. After his friends had fell asleep, he was constantly thinking about Minori, and her fight with Ami . He knew it was meaningless to keep thinking, and he knew that no matter what he thought, Minori was not going to change her feelings.

It's just that in that fight, he had a slight feeling that Ami was trying to goad Minori into saying something she had determined not to say, something which Ryuuji did not know about.

Come to think of it, Ami too was hiding something.

Breathing white steam from his mouth, Ryuuji began to think, Minori, Ami, Taiga and Kitamura all have something they didn't say. This "something" is usually something they desire the other side to know. If everyone is able to be honest and understanding with each other, then they could make the cogs spin once again without any deception.

The problem was it could not be said. They are afraid of the awkwardness it would cause, afraid that once everything is placed under the sun, this awkwardness would lead to a critical separation between themselves. As they became worried and scared this would happen, they decided to hide whatever they wanted to say deep within their hearts, thinking, "Surely they would understand even if I don't say it? Surely they would know? Surely they would realize?" And so they would begin to second-guess what each other is thinking.

Yet they would still hope for each other to say what they wanted to say, they would even feel depressed while being in each other's company simply because it was not said. By withholding one's thoughts, both sides would become hurt by it. Ryuuji also had things he didn't say, and there were a lot of them. Besides those concerning Minori... though Ryuuji didn't mention it, there was something else that was bothering him.

Looking around at the students in their shiny costumes within the skiing track, Ryuuji found Taiga. She was sharing her sled with Minori, both happily laughing away.

There's no reason to get in their way. And so Ryuuji turned to leave...

"Hmm... what are you doing here?"

"My legs are feeling a bit sore, so I'm just resting here."

... And saw Ami.

She was kneeling in a pile of soft snow without anyone around her, building her own miniature snow mountain broodingly. Ryuuji was a bit surprised Ami would respond in her normal tone, as before whenever she saw

him, she would always coldly address him with "You idiot".

After what happened last night, Ryuuji felt awkward when approaching Ami, "... Did you trip?"

Ami's ski and skiing pole were stuck in the snow.

"Yeah, and I'm tired. I forgot to bring my wallet, so I couldn't even buy coffee even if I walk to the wooden hut ."

"... And so you're here alone building your snow mountain...?"

"This is no mountain, it's an igloo."

How can that possibly be an igloo... Seeing Ami use her gloved hands to pile a fragile looking hill, even an amateur like Ryuuji could tell there was no way she was building an igloo.

"... Rather than piling the snow up to make a hill, shouldn't you be making snowballs like you would when making a snowman?"

"This is fine."

2－C
高須
2－C
川嶋

Ami still squatted and built her snow mountain. Her gloved hands continue to pile up the snow, padding one layer atop another --- *At this rate, she'll never be able to pile an igloo big enough to fit herself in.*

Looking at Ami's cheek which reflected the glow on the mountain, Ryuuji could tell she was still feeling miffed by her argument with Minori last night, which was why she was here alone piling snow and killing time , as though trying to sort out her feelings.

"Hey!"

"Let me help you."

Ryuuji sat opposite of her and began to pile snow himself. He didn't want to console Ami, neither did he want to ask about the fight last night, he didn't even forget that Ami still hates an idiot like him.

It's just that Ryuuji was human too, and even she couldn't build the igloo she wanted. He couldn't bring himself to leave Ami piling white snow meaninglessly on her own here. Besides, if he was really getting in her way , she would have said so already.

"... Hey, you should make the snow firm first."

"..."

"Just do it. If you're gonna pile them up, it'll be a waste if it all falls to pieces."

Ami stopped what she was doing, Ryuuji went and pat the mountain to stop the snow from falling. But he didn't expect...

"Whoa!?"

Ami to drop her face into the mountain all of a sudden , like a drunk partygoer dropping her face onto the cake.

"What are you doing!? That's cold! Could this be some kind of secret facial cosmetic therapy?"

After a few seconds.

"You know..."

Ami finally lifted her head, her brows and eyelashes were covered in snow, with her face and neck red from the cold, "There's something I must... confess to you. I..."

"Yeah, I know, I know. I expect you to have something to confess, and a lot as well. Why don't you start by apologizing for calling me an idiot?"

"Not that, no... it..."

Placing her chin on the near collapsing mountain, she closed her eyes and breathed in deeply with her nose, she then said in one breath,

"It may be my fault that Minori-chan rejected you."

Ryuuji didn't say anything, and only opened his jaw as he looked at Ami with an expression that read, *What'd you say?*

"A while ago... when you were not aware of it, I taunted Minori-chan... I didn't know why I said that, but what's was said couldn't be taken back. I was thinking maybe Minori-chan was mindful of what I said, and so rejected you."

Ami had said that, but Ryuuji was unable to react right away, since he simply could not understand what she meant.

"Um... then... could you tell me what you said to her?"

"Are you mad? Heh, I guess anyone would be."

"You didn't give me the details, so I wouldn't know how to respond."

"... I can't tell you."

Again, something that "could not be said".

"And I got into a fight with Minori-chan last night. Even though I regret having said those things, yet every time I see her face, I get pissed off. There're many reasons for me getting angry, but the main reason was... she never once faced me directly. No matter how fierce we argued, I just couldn't figure out what her true thoughts were."

Lowering her brows, Ami raised her arms, and swooped them to destroy her mountain. She then sighed,

"Takasu-kun, you're too stupid. That's why I hate you."

"You're still at that..."

"... But I also hate myself for being stupid as well."

Ami sat wearily on the pile of snow she just destroyed, messing and mixing the snow up with her hands, and then looked into the gray skies,

"Hey, Takasu-kun,"

The snow began to get bigger. Ami's hair was covered in beads of melted snow. Ryuuji simply looked at her, not knowing what to say.

"I've heard Taiga's doing her best to live independently, while Minori-chan has flatly rejected you. .. Both have let go of you, should I take this chance and grab your hand? In this case, it would suit my plan just fine, because I've always liked Takasu-kun, and wanted to go out with you... If I said that, what would you do? Though none of that is true."

Before he could even comprehend...

"... Ehhh!? You fell over before you were startled?"

PLOP! Ryuuji quickly rubbed his face, trying to calm his heart from beating rapidly. The snow on his gloves was so cold he felt his nose could fall off.

Ami didn't smile, and simply stared at Ryuuji,

"I told you I was kidding. Believe me, there is no plan... I never thought of anything like 'It would be great if things were to become like this', honest... But... Sigh, it's also true that I got myself too involved."

Even when it's got nothing to do with me... The snow dissolved on her lips together with the words she was about to say, as well as the soft smile that she made,

"... Bound by guilt, even I am suffering by my own undoing. Because I made too many mistakes, that's why it's ended up like this."

"Like this... you mean Kushieda rejecting me? You don't need to feel responsible for this. I don't know what happened between you and Kushieda, but I won't allow anyone to shove the responsibility of me getting dumped to someone else."

"... You're right."

Ami breathed in with her nose, and slowly got up smiling, with her trademark Ami-like smile, she said to Ryuuji,

"Okay, we're no longer friends."

"... Huh?"

Ami took off her gloves and placed them under her armpits, hooking her first finger and thumb of both hands together and pointing them towards Ryuuji,

"We're severing ties between ourselves."

She said rhythmically as she separated her hands,

"... Why are you severing ties with me?"

"Because I hate idiots... so we're done, period."

Because you hate idiots? As there were two idiots, Ami didn't specify which idiot she was severing ties with as she turned to leave.

What the hell is this?

Didn't I say you should say things properly?

Ryuuji looked at Ami's back, not knowing what to say, and could only stand there helplessly.

"Bakachiiiiii----- Look ouuuuuut----!!!"

"We didn't mean it, we didn't meeeaaan iiiiit-----!"

"EHHHHH---!!!???" A sled carrying Taiga and Minori came crashing towards Ami.

They had tried to stop the sled with their feet, but it was going too fast for them to do so. As Ryuuji looked on speechlessly, Taiga was tossed off the sled onto the snow, Minori followed as well after losing her balance.

The sled then continued to slide towards the skiing track entrance after running over Ami.

"... I told you to look out..."

Taiga looked apologetically nervous as she pulled Ami , who was buried in the snow, as well as patting off the snow on her.

"W... why you!? How many times must you crash your sled before you finally give up!? You're too dumb to learn riding this anyway! Why don't you just walk instead!?"

"That's--- why--- we're apologizing! Anyway, we're headed to the wooden hut there, I can treat you to some ice cream."

"No friggin way! That's too damn cold, idiot!"

A ballistic Ami began kicking Taiga's butt, but as her skiing suit was very thick, Ami's attacks didn't seem to have much effect on Taiga.

"Sorry Amin! W, we couldn't stop the sled... so forgive me! Really!"

As Minori came to apologize to Ami as well...

"Don't give me this 'forgive me' crap!"

Ami glared at Minori and yelled,

"You did that on purpose, didn't you!? That was totally on purpose! I can feel your malicious intent!"

"Ehh!? Of course not, absolutely! I really couldn't stop it!"

"You *were* doing it on purpose! You're still mad at what happened yesterday, aren't you!? Come to think of it, you came to interfere because you saw me talking to Takasu-kun, right!? I knew it!"

Ami's face and eyes become reddened, and veins popped up in her forehead like a comic character, even her nose appeared red as she threw a snowball towards Minori.

The snowball fell right on Minori's face, causing her to wobble,

"Whaaaaa!? Yesterday!? You mean our argument last night!? I thought we were through with that already, and now you want to bring it up again!?"

Whoa... Taiga and Ryuuji exchanged glances... *You should stop them.... No, YOU stop them!* They both communicated with their eyes, but as they were pretending not to know what transpired last night, it was hard for them to interfere.

"You sure know how to talk! You've been ignoring my presence all along, how dare you say you're through with that!?"

"I just didn't have anything better to say! Just because I didn't say something interesting doesn't mean I'm ignoring you!"

"Seeing your pretentious attitude just pisses me off, you brawny birdbrain!"

"Who's being pretentious here!? Stop pushing your luck just because I'm restraining myself!"

Whap! Minori shoved Ami on the shoulder.

"Ugh! Why you...!"

Ami tried to push back, but her hand was caught by Minori, who proceeded to slap her in the face. The two girls continued to glare at each other... Physically, Ami was no match for Minori.

"You hit my face!"

"So? It's not like you'd survive on that alone!"

Their voices echoed throughout the mountain. Ami stomped her feet and shouted,

"I HATE YOU! I've always hated you! You drive me insane everytime I see you!"

"Oh really! Then what!? I couldn't really care less about being hated by you!"

Minori was just as spiteful with her words. The atmosphere between them was getting more terrifying--- "I hate you, I hate you, I *hate* you!" "As if I care! Stop talking to me!" "Suits me just fine!" "By the way, why don't you piss off back to your old school!?" "What business is it of yours anyway!? You poor girl, why don't you work your ass off for the rest of your life!?" "What'd you say!? Then why don't you live the rest of your model life selling your face and wearing all those makeups and fake masks!" "How dare you!?" In a few sentences, their row had involved stuff that should never have been spoken, and they were shoving each other with more and more force as they provoked each other, "You want a piece of me!?" "Don't go crying back to your mama afterwards!" *Whoa..." Taiga looked worryingly towards the two of them,*

"We can't stand by and not do anything. I'm going to fight on Minorin's side! Go Ryuuji, you'll be fighting on Bakachi's side!"

"Okay... WAIT A MINUTE! This isn't right! We should be stopping them, you idiot!"

"This scene looks kinda scary, I only see these in my dreams!"

"Actually your fight with Big Brother was even scarier! You two were nosebleeding all over the place!"

"What's going on?" The schoolmates in their shiny skiing suits were beginning to gather upon hearing the commotion. Ryuuji and Taiga prepared to move to stop them.

"Ah...!"

At this moment, only Taiga saw the hair clip on Minori's hair fly off by Ami's hand, falling on a pile of newly fallen snow on the side. Ami and Minori's fight was getting increasingly heated and no one else noticed it.

Taiga quickly rushed towards the hair clip. *That hair clip is very important, I can't let it get lost!* Taiga thought as she tread through the thick snow and prepared to stretch her arm to grab it...

"...!"

When the snow below her suddenly collapsed, she lost her balance, and didn't even have time to scream as she fell.

Maya, Nanako and Kitamura came rushing towards the fighting girls.

"Stop! Just what on earth are you doing!?"

"It's all her fault! All her fault! All her fault! I didn't do anything!"

"*You* started all this!"

The two girls were finally separated as even the Single Lady (aged 30) arrived. Restrained by Kitamura, Ami's eyes were still red as she continued to shout, while

Minori's breathing became rapid as she stared furiously at Ami with gritted teeth. A group of students that gathered because of the commotion began whispering amongst themselves upon seeing a rare fight between Minori and Ami.

Ryuuji was quite shocked as well, *How did it come to this?*

"Anyway, I think you should take Kushieda back to your room and calm her down... Taiga?"

That's strange." Ryuuji looked around him, and discovered Taiga, who was just standing beside him a while ago, was gone .

"... Taiga's missing!"

Hearing Ryuuji's voice, Minori stopped staring at Ami and turned and looked surprisingly at Ryuuji.

"She was just here with me a while ago, trying to stop you girls from fighting..."

"Taiga...?"

Minori looked around, her vision stopping at one spot, Ryuuji also discovered the same clue at the same time.

It was a trail of unnatural footprints headed towards the new pile of snow. Minori shoved off Ryuuji's hand on her shoulder and followed the footprints, with Ryuuji following behind.

"These footprints... could these be... Taiga's?"

"N... no way...!?"

They noticed the pile of snow was slightly protruding upwards, and just further ahead was the cliff, where the original pile of new snow had collapsed. They tried to move further forward, but were held back by a sudden gust of strong wind.

They had no idea how deep the cliff went, all they could see on the slope edge filled with conifers was tracks of someone who had fallen off.

* * *

... "Is it true that the Palmtop Tiger from Class C has gone missing?"

... "The missing Class C student is *that* Palmtop Tiger!? "

The group of second year students was in a clamour while being gathered in the wooden hall reserved for group visitors. Outside the blurry windows was the blizzard as reported in the weather forecast. One could hear the blizzard knocking against the windows.

"Takasu, I just asked Koigakubo-sensei. The slope where Aisaka fell into is a conifer forest, further down would be a road that is off limits during a blizzard. The skiing track staff have already begun searching along that road leading to the slope, if they still couldn't find her, they might have to contact the police... Takasu!"

"...!"

Ryuuji got startled by the clapping noise in front of him, and finally lifted his head. He then noticed that Kitamura was staring at him,

"Get a hold of yourself! Don't worry, we'll find her!"

"Yeah..."

That was all Ryuuji could manage to say. Sitting on a sturdy chair sculpted to resemble a tree trunk, his mind still felt numb as though it were all a dream. His eyes were fixed on his scalded wound on his right hand while thinking, *That idiot.*

That stupid Taiga, she's finally allowed her clumsiness to put herself in danger.

He has seen her fallen off stairs, tripped over, bumped into things, food falling off while eating, that was all relatively normal. She was even nearly run over by a car not long ago. This right hand too left traces of her clumsiness. It was a miracle that she managed not to get seriously injured despite all these accidents. And yet that day had finally arrived.

While blaming Taiga for her clumsiness on one hand, on the other hand he blamed himself for not noticing that she had walked away from him, even though he was just beside her. It was like that during the Christmas Ball as well. As he thought more and more, Ryuuji hoped this time would be the same as last time.

The last time Taiga was safely at home. When he noticed she had disappeared, he only needed to run and he would naturally find her there.

But this time...

Ryuuji was even afraid to look out the window. *What if they couldn't find her in this weather?* Ryuuji quickly stopped that thought. *No, it definitely won't happen. Taiga may be clumsy, but she has extraordinary reflexes, as well as a surprisingly healthy body, she'll definitely make it through. There's got to be a way, there has to be.*

Ryuuji clasped his palms and prayed while closing his eyes stiffly. He didn't even notice that Noto and Haruta, who sat opposite himself, were looking worryingly at him.

There's gotta be a way... Yet within the corner of this hope, the thought of "what if" kept creeping in. *If I could turn back the clock, back to that moment, then I definitely won't keep my eyes off Taiga, and be able to grab her hand.*

Even if people were to misunderstand that we have a father-daughter relationship, even if this obstructs Taiga's independence or her romantic relationship, I'll never leave Taiga alone no matter what. It doesn't matter what people would say about our relationship, even if it means having to cut off these ears so as not to hear them, or getting rid of my brain so as not to think about them.

I will never let go of that idiot's hands, even if she'll end up stepping on my legs from behind.

If I had thought about this earlier, if I had known Taiga would encounter something like this, then I definitely wouldn't let go of her.

No matter how gross people make of it, I should not have left her behind.

Despite this, what are these hands, and these legs still doing here?

"What a big storm..."

Hearing a voice behind him, Ryuuji turned around.

Minori sat on a chair behind Ryuuji and looked out of the window. She bit her lips as she put on her cap, wore her gloves and zipped up her skiing suit. Ryuuji furrowed his brows as he had a bad feeling about this,

"Kushieda... what are you doing?"

"The blizzard's so huge, she has to be found quickly. So I'm going."

She stood up once she finished speaking, Ryuuji quickly stopped her,

"Are you crazy!? What'll we do if you go missing too!? "

"I can't just sit here and wait! It's alright, I'll be right back! As soon as I have a look at that place!"

Without waiting for Ryuuji's reply, she threw off Ryuuji's hand and started walking off. "Stop!" Kitamura noticed Minori's movements as well and walked in front of her to stop her. But Minori refused to listen and

shoved off Kitamura's hand as she headed down the stairs towards the first floor entrance and stepped outside. Ryuuji tried grabbing her shoulder many times, and became agitated as she kept shoving his hand off,

".... Dammit... then I'm coming as well!"

"Then so am I! Noto! Haruta! Please inform the sensei about this!"

"What!? You can't do that!" Hearing Kitamura was going as well, Noto and the rest quickly stood up. But if they could not stop Minori, then they couldn't let her go alone like that.

"What should we do!?" Noto and the rest rushed to inform their teacher. Ami stayed behind, her pale face was lowered as she sat all alone not saying anything while her expression remained blank.

As more and more visitors made their way back due to the blizzard, Ryuuji and Kitamura caught up with Minori , who was treading on her boots.

Her goggles were already covered with snow, while her feet had sank into the soft layer of snow many times. Ryuuji finally managed to grab Minori's hand, and Kitamura too grabbed her other hand and said,

"Don't rush, Kushieda! If you really want to look for Aisaka, then you should calm down and look around you!"

"...!"

Hearing Kitamura's commanding voice, Minori finally turned her head around, looking worried while nodding and catching her breath.

As the three of them were about to be blown off by another gust of strong wind, they quickly held each other's hands and marched forward. The place where Minori had fought with Ami was not far from the wooden hut beside the gentle slope of the skiing track.

"There's traces of someone falling down here!"

Minori approached the bulging edge of the cliff and pointed to the part where new snow had fallen.

"Hey! Don't get too close! It's dangerous!"

"But Taiga's down there! TAIGA----!!! ANSWER ME---!!!"

Minori stretched out her upper body, trying to get a better look below, Ryuuji grabbed hold of her sleeve, and planting his feet firmly on the ground to prevent her from falling down. The snow beside the tip of Minori's feet had already begun to crumble due to their weight. Ryuuji could feel cold sweat running down his back, and he could hardly close his jaws due to nervousness.

Ryuuji held on to Minori while looking down at the densely forested snowy slope below. They could hardly see the bottom--- If it weren't for this blizzard, they might be able to find some tracks of where Taiga slid down.

"Huh...?"

Something was flashing.

The flashing object was farther off from where they were searching, it was concealed just below a small dune, hidden in a hard to see corner below. That object continued to flicker like a lone star within a white night sky, shining a weak orange glow.

The weak light was soon blocked by more snow falling from above, but Ryuuji could clearly see it.

"Taiga...!"

Taiga fell because she was trying to retrieve this. If I can find that, then I'll be able to find Taiga.

"What!? Did you see something!? Is Taiga down there!? Have you found her!?"

"I think so! We should hurry up and call for... no, it might be gone soon... Damn! Kushieda, you go get the other adults! Kitamura, you stay here, if I can't climb back up, then either pull me up or get help!"

"No, I'm..."

Minori had wanted to say something, but quickly changed her mind and nodded,

"... Okay, I'll go get someone!"

And ran back towards the thick blizzard. Using Kitamura as a beacon, Ryuuji began to slowly slide down the slope.

As the slope was getting too steep for him to use his feet alone, Ryuuji began to grab onto the trees after sliding a few steps down, pulling his feet out whenever they got too deep into the snow. His target was the faint light emitted by the small hair clip.

Don't disappear! Please don't let it disappear! Ryuuji nearly spoke out his thoughts as he continued to slide downwards. *Just a little closer...* He huffed while clinging onto the snow, wiping the frost off his goggles.

He had slid for about twenty metres. *They probably can't see this place from the road down there.* He arrived beside a lush evergreen tree, picked up the hair clip and looked around,

"T.. TAIGA!"

And just beside the hair clip, Taiga was half buried under a pile of soft snow, cuddling her body inside a hole under the tree. Careful not to trip, Ryuuji slowly made his way towards the tree hole, firmly planting his feet into the snow as he moved forward, and picked up her tiny body.

"Taiga! Taiga! Taiga!"

He pulled Taiga's soft body out onto the snow, and saw her head lie backwards effortlessly. He held her tightly while feeling her neck... *It's still warm, and she still has pulse. But having fallen from so high, she must have hit her head.* Upon seeing some red fluid flow down her forehead, his breathing became harder, *No way...* This was the first time he ever felt his heart shiver all the way up to his spine.

"It hurts..."

Taiga whimpered weakly, Ryuuji noticed her moving her eyebrows and twitching her face. *She's still alive, thank goodness.* Taking a deep breath, Ryuuji looked up towards the steep slope... *There's no time to think or hesitate now.* And so he decided to carry Taiga's 40kg heavy body up the slope. But whenever he placed his foot on the slope, the snow beneath will collapse because of their weight, meaning it was impossible to make any firm footing. It seemed he had no choice but to hold onto Taiga and wait for help to arrive.

Faced with a sense of despair and helplessness, Ryuuji made a groan from deep within his throat. At this moment, Taiga suddenly grabbed her arm onto Ryuuji's body,

"I fell... Oww..."

And mumbled to herself as though sleepwalking. *Looks like she's still fine, from the way she manages to hold onto me.*

Ryuuji once again sank his knees into the snow, and slowly crawled forward, holding onto tree branches while climbing upwards. He wanted to speak to Taiga, but there was no way he could, because right now he must grit his teeth to prevent Taiga from falling off.

"Ryuuji..."

Taiga's hand now touched Ryuuji's face, and her gloveless hand felt the goggles on his eyes. *She'll probably mistake them for glasses.*

"Oh... Kitamura-kun...?"

Taiga had indeed guessed wrongly.

But it didn't matter, as it was not the right moment to yell "It's me!" *In any case, I must hurry.*

"I thought it was Ryuuji... who had come to save me... I thought it had to be Ryuuji... I'm sorry... So sorry."

The voice he heard was strangely relieved, yet it still felt incoherent like sleep talking, which actually sounded quite terrifying. Taiga continued to use her slightly higher pitched voice than usual and spoke incoherently beside Ryuuji's ear,

"Kitamura-kun, looks like... your powers didn't work... "

Ryuuji's foot slid a little, he tried his hardest not to yell . Had Taiga not held on tightly onto Ryuuji, they would both have fallen into the valley.

"... I'm so sorry, Patron God of Broken Hearts, but my prayers didn't seem to work... I had wished that my love for Ryuuji, would all disappear... But it didn't come true.. . I wanted to become strong... But it was useless..."

Ryuuji quickly used his right hand to hold onto Taiga, who had nearly slipped off.

He gritted his teeth with all his strength and held onto her tightly, and looked upwards.

Kitamura saw us and is yelling at us. We're almost there.

"... No matter what I do, I still... love Ryuuji... Even though I wished for him to get together with Minorin... In the end, it's still painful, so painful... I can't take it anymore..."

"..."

"I'm so useless... I tried to work hard on my own... I said I would... and yet I could only wait for someone to save me... I'm so weak... Too weak... It's pathetic..."

Taiga's tears kept flowing out of her tightly shut eyes, her hands had lost their strength as well. Ryuuji was now supporting her weight with just one hand. He furiously tried to hold onto Taiga while climbing upwards, but his foot slid, and he lost his balance.

As the two of them were about to fall off...

"Huh...!?"

A firm hand appeared before him, it was a group of grownups dressed in luminescent skiing suits. In no time they had dragged both Ryuuji and Taiga upwards.
They're probably the skiing track staff, or even the police.

"Are you guys okay? Are you hurt anywhere?"

"I'm fine! But Taiga! She's bleeding...!"

Not caring who it was, Ryuuji yelled loudly towards the person who helped placed a blanket over him. The grownup in the luminescent suit nodded understandingly and picked Taiga up before walking away.

Ryuuji couldn't sit upwards, and could only lie on the snow while catching his breath, as though he had just been thrown down by a strong force.

All he could see before him was whiteness - That was the blizzard, though another blizzard was also ravaging within his mind.

He knew Minori was running towards him, so was Kitamura, and he had now finally realized what that " something" which they were unwilling to say was, as well as realizing his own foolishness.

It was like a tying a string into a dead knot, which has finally been forcefully pulled apart. As the force was too strong, the string was close to being broken. And if it were to break, not even Ryuuji would know how it will all end.

"... Kitamura, I have a favour to ask you."

Ryuuji requested to his best friend, who was carrying him on one shoulder and looking worryingly at him. He restrained his stomach with all his strength, not letting Kitamura hear his voice quivering.

"Can you tell everyone that it was you that had rescued Taiga, please don't ask why. If Taiga asked, please tell her that she had been unconscious all the time and had said nothing. I beg you... Please!"

Holding onto Ryuuji, Kitamura silently said,

"There's something Aisaka had instructed me not to tell anyone else..."

Ryuuji couldn't see Kitamura's expression behind his goggles.

"... When I came across her during the New Year, she looked rather depressed, and was praying seriously at me... the Patron God of Broken Hearts. Could it be it has something to do with that?"

Ryuuji didn't answer, neither could he answer. He didn't know what sound he'd make if he did.

"It has something to do with it, right? ... I see... Christmas night... and then the New Year... I see."

"It wasn't anybody's fault, and it certainly wasn't yours either..." Kitamura nodded and said, though his voice had faded into the blizzard.

* * *

In the end Taiga was hardly injured. The heavens had indeed blessed Taiga with a strong body to complement her clumsiness.

"She had a cut on her forehead, but overall she's fine." That was what the teacher told them during dinner time. After creating such a huge commotion, Taiga would certainly be embarrassed and would feel like dying.

Sighs of relief by the students could be heard around, some nosy person even raised his hand and asked, "Then will she be joining us in our activities tomorrow?"

Yet the answer from the Single Lady (aged 30) was unexpected,

"Aisaka-san will be staying in hospital tonight, and she will be fetched home by her mother tomorrow. It will be too exhausting for her to travel around in a coach."

Ryuuji nearly dropped his chopsticks.

Mother... You mean her real mother? She didn't even come to school when Taiga was suspended, and now she's coming all this way to the middle of nowhere just to fetch Taiga? And it's not like Taiga's seriously injured!

"Isn't that great, Taka-chan? Taiga's fine~!"

"... Er, yeah..."

Ryuuji smiled casually back at Haruta, whose eyes were now fixed at the pocket on Ryuuji's chest,

"Huh? That hair clip is now back with Taka-chan!"

After picking it up on the snow and placing it in his pocket, he had completely forgotten about it. The idiot Haruta whispered besides Ryuuji's ear and said,

"By the way~ that hair clip, that's the Christmas present you were planning to send to 'that person', right? When you were prepared to throw it away, I saw some Christmas wrappings on it, now I know why..."

"Yeah..."

Ryuuji's mind was still stuck in that blizzard.

He shrugged his shoulders to confirm Haruta's thoughts, completely not noticing his surroundings, because there was too much for him to think about.

Which was why he failed to notice "that person" was just sitting not far from him, and like a radar, was filtering out all the background noise and focusing only on Ryuuji's voice. And when she heard their conversation, she immediately understood at once.

She finally realized how her unintentional actions had caused so much damage.

Minori silently stood up, and slowly crept out of the restaurant without anyone noticing, running past the chilly corridor, she came to the empty resting room.

She fell onto the sofa which Ryuuji had sat before, and buried her face within her knees and wept. She did not know the source of her sadness, she just knew she hated her hands very much, those small, feminine hands which simply were not big enough to hide her tearful face.

Using those hands to cover her face, Minori cuddled herself and wept silently.

The blizzard should end tomorrow.

Yet the sound of the storm banging on the window was still terrifying enough to scare a child, and even the glass was shaking nonstop.

Author's Notes

I have finally lost the envelope containing my broadband connection ID and password. (It even had a disclaimer outside saying "Please do not lose this!") I was always thinking, "I might lose this sooner than later." But having moved house twice during these past ten years, that envelope still remained beside me. And yet one day it just disappeared from where it was supposed to be. I searched everywhere but still could not find it, in the desk drawer, bed drawer, book shelf, cabinet, kitchen, the streets during dawn... in Sakuragicho... of course it couldn't be there.

W, what should I do? I am too used to living in procrastination all day. This is the complete version of Takemiya after 30 years of evolution. Since my evolution is now complete, it means my body and heart lack flexibility, and so I was unable to react instantly when faced with sudden incidents like these. I lack coordination, have slow reflexes, and can no longer grow any taller. Neither my height can increase anymore, nor my lost objects can ever return... In other words, my days are numbered.

And so, despite losing so many things, *Toradora!* has now entered its eighth volume. A big thank you to you readers for hanging along with this as well as all your support! So how did you find this volume?

Thanks to everyone, this series is getting stronger everyday, it now has a manga series illustrated by Zekkyo-sensei, as well as an anime in production, and... Argh! I really wanted to tell you all, but there's so many things I can't say yet, as we have a lot of works in secret at the moment! Anyway, I hope everyone who has enjoyed this series would enjoy the development from here onwards, that is the most important thing! I hope you will continue to support *Toradora!*

That's right, there's a lot of stuff which everyone is looking forward to in the story, so now's not the time for me to self-destruct, or to be bitten by bugs. By the way, there's been some large spots appearing on my right hand, I was thinking whether they could be measles, or pressure, or even some mental condition... And so I went to see a dermatologist, to which his response was, "Oh, you've got an infection from insect bites. You're the eleventh one today. Those are moth bites." Neither is it the time to check up on photos on what these moth

larvae look like and faint from the sight of them (I'd better not faint). Neither is it time for me to keep scratching until its stings penetrate deep within my skin, causing me to faint (Perhaps it's better not to know what it looks like...)

And so, I'm really grateful to everyone for finishing this book. Please look forward to *Toradora!* Volume 9! As for Yasu-sensei and our main editor, the road ahead of us may still be long, but please don't self-destruct as well, let us fight together till the end!

Takemiya Yuyuko